The Secret of the Curé d'Ars

by Henri Ghéon

Foreword

Of all great hearts, the greatest is still the heart of a saint. For it wants to contain not only its neighbour, strangers, all suffering, sinful, warring humanity - but God Himself.

Never has the love of mankind been so talked of as during the last couple of centuries. Yet never has every man so fiercely coveted the good things of this world; as if there were no end of them and they might be possessed without limit by all; as if each man's boundless coveting had a free field to work in and was not certain sooner or later to clash with a hundred rival covetings, each in turn wanting its share - its share being everything whatsoever that the world - which gives so little - can give.

Where desire knows no limit, you have cruelty, envy, hatred, revolt, war; and love - even of mankind - only begins at the point where desire leaves off.

It may be asked if such a love of men is human - though the stunted seed of it lies in every man.

It is inhuman because it is superhuman. It demands grace from on high, a vision - clear or dim - of an end above man's nature, an end from which man's nature draws its truest dignity. Men can only love one another as brothers when they know themselves for the sons of one Father. Outside this universal fatherhood, there is no bond strong enough to unite men permanently in love. The bonds that pleasure knots are weak; the bonds that self-interest knots are harsh.

So it is their love of God that is the measure of the greatness of great souls - whether they suspect it, or do not suspect it, or merely catch occasional glimpses of it.

That is the secret of the miraculously living charity which flamed in the heart and inflamed the heart of Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, a country curé of France, raised up by God, as it would seem, to give their true orientation to "those Christian ideas run mad" which,

three years after his birth, France in her frenzy sent winging to the four corners of the world.

Youth

One is tremendously tempted to cast this naive and very extraordinary history - which is so naive and so very extraordinary only because it is true with a truth beyond our sounding - into the form of a fable. We should begin:

"Once upon a time there lived in France in the Province of Lyons a little peasant boy, a Christian who from his earliest days loved solitude and loved God.

"As the clever gentlemen in Paris who had made the Revolution prevented people from praying, he used to go with his parents to hear Mass in a barn. The priests were in hiding, and when they were caught their heads were cut off with all available neatness.

"That is why it entered Jean-Marie Vianney's head to become a priest.

"But though he was much given to prayer he had no learning. He tended sheep, he ploughed the fields. He entered his seminary late and failed in all his examinations. But at last, as vocations happened to be scarce, they decided that they might as well take him.

"He was appointed to Ars, and there he stayed till he died, France's least curé in France's least village.

"But, at any rate, he really was curé there, which doesn't always happen, and he was curé with such thoroughness that France's least village had France's greatest curé, so that the whole of France made pilgrimage to see him.

"Now, he converted all who came to him, and if he had not died, he would have converted the whole of France.

"He cured souls and bodies, he read hearts like a book.

"And the Blessed Virgin visited him, and the foul fiend dragged him by the heels but could not prevent him being a saint.

"They made him a Canon, a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour - and later they beatified him.

"But while he lived, he could never make out why.

"Which was a very good proof that he had deserved his glory.

"All this happened in the nineteenth century, which in Paradise, where they know the true value of men, is called 'The Century of the Curé d'Ars,' but, of course, France could scarcely be expected to know that."

All this is nothing but the truth; but we must look at the reverse of the medal. There we find the drama, the pivot of a thousand other dramas - the man who saved souls, and the price he paid, and the countless souls he saved. Heaven and earth and hell meet in it. To write it properly you would need five or six Balzacs. *La Comedie Humaine* is a mere trifle compared with the play that was acted at Ars over a space of thirty years, and at exactly the same time, with all the threads in the hands of one poor priest.

But we aim lower, since we wish no more than to bring into one honest picture the various traits which witnesses and the three biographers - Monnin, Joseph Vianney and Trochu - put before us in their memoirs and in their books. The matter is measureless, not to be exhausted here. But we shall invent nothing. This little book is history.

A vocation must always be a great mystery. Yet we may try to give some shadow of an explanation. At the end of the eighteenth century the Court and the large towns no longer believed in much. But the countryside kept its traditional beliefs intact, at least in that corner of the Lyonnais where faith was always strong and obstinate - with more than a suspicion of Jansenism. Faith, indeed, was so strong, so authentic, that such a man as Jean-Marie's grandfather would give tramps a bed; not that there were not some precious scoundrels on the road; simply men were less fearful than in our day, and as a matter of course placed human prudence far below the teaching of the gospel according to which a poor man, any poor man, is the living image of Christ.

All the biographers of Jean-Marie Vianney have had much to say of a very famous mendicant who paid a mysterious visit to this same farmer. For those who do not know, it may be worth saying something of Benedict Joseph Labre.

The scandal of his age (which could only be horrified at him and not a little shocked), this strange man had come from Artois to the Trappist monastery of Sept-Fonds in order that he might, in that hard place, lead the hardest possible life. His health broke down; he became a pilgrim and thenceforth lived without a roof under the open sky. Like Saint Alexis before him, he was "the poor man" par excellence, flung aside, jeered at, beaten - occasionally even received with kindness, which was more than he ever showed to himself. He fasted three times a week, bore heat and cold, swarmed with vermin, prayed always and never spoke. He replied by a nod with the greatest friendliness. He visited all the famous shrines - Rome, Loreto, Compostella - spending one half his life tramping, the other half on his knees. He died at the age of thirty-five. His death was due to sheer poverty. It was as though the sorrowful shade of Christ walked this refined and irreligious world, to warn it of the gulf into which it was so soon to fall.

On his way to Rome he presented himself, in 1770, at the house of Pierre Vianney. There he was given warmth, food, a bed. They even guessed something of his sanctity. He was asked to bless the children, among them the little Mathieu, who was to be the father of Jean-Marie.

Was it merely by chance that he knocked at that door? By chance, that sixteen years later Pierre Vianney's grandson received the names of the Baptist, the beloved disciple and the Mother of God? Providence does nothing without sound reason. A name given at baptism is likewise a protection, or better, a protector, appointed by Providence, so that saints are always the spiritual offspring of other saints, living or dead, who come to the aid of their natural family. Our saint was born under the three-fold sign of Christian humility, Christian poverty, Christian chastity, and these words, which are all different ways of saying the word "love," meant something considerable for his parents.

To the north of Lyons is a village of rather more than a thousand souls, which 'is called Dardilly. There may still be seen the farmhouse, very upright and of respectable appearance, where dwelt the father and mother of Jean-Marie. Mathieu Vianney and Marie Beluse had six children. Jean-Marie was number four.

It is difficult for us to form any idea of the life of a peasant family at that day. We must think of much work but great peace. The earth with all its needs to keep men down, but untroubled faith to draw men upwards. They held their faith firmly. Among themselves they talked of the gospel stories as today men talk of the doubtful news in the papers. On the whole we must admit that what the prophets say is quite as valuable as what the journalists say. The evening prayer was said in common. Jean-Marie learnt at the same time how Jesus was born and how the corn grows. One was no more matter for astonishment than the other - simply it was so. When he was old enough, they sent him to guard the sheep. He was a small boy, very wide awake, much given to thought, knowing that his father was a good workman, admiring his mother's piety. As he said later, "Virtue passes easily from the hearts of mothers into the hearts of children."

Scrupulosity and extreme rigourism are comprehensible enough in an Aloysius Gonzaga, born in the unthinkable degradation of a renaissance court. If he wished to keep his soul unsullied, he had to lower his eyes, but Jean-Marie could look straight; nothing was there to give him scandal. But the impetuosity of his nature was accompanied by a need for recollection which showed itself very early. He turned his eyes within, not so much to avoid seeing evil - for that he only knew of by hearsay - as to see good more clearly. His eyes looked out beyond the honest toil, the regular life, his daily prayers, towards the supreme good on which all others depend. He loved work and he loved play, but he had discovered something better. Not timorous, but very great of soul, he denied himself to possess all.

One of the fine paintings of Paul Borel - which are incidentally the only possible artistic justification of an uncommonly ugly Basilica - illustrates a tradition which remains uncontradicted. One evening the mother, looking for her son, found him at the far end of the

cattle shed, on his knees in the straw, holding in his hand a little statue of the Blessed Virgin, which was his favourite toy. He did not hear his mother enter, he was praying. It was a strange game for a four-year old to play. But children are apt to surprise their elders 5 they are not afraid of oddity. Only a fool would judge their future according to the mere inventions of their fancy. And only a greater fool still would answer for the continuance of their good qualities unless, of course, they have to defend them against attack. A little contradiction does no harm to the soul's deepest feelings. If our wounded nature, mindless of its baptism, had had any chance of resuming control over the soul of Jean-Marie, the horrors of the time would have flung themselves violently and decisively into the opposite scale. One year later he had to hide to do what was right. The French Revolution certainly did not intend to play its part in the formation of a saint.

In the village of Dardilly this great event had passed almost unnoticed. A priest who had taken the oath came in place of the revered curé, who after having taken the oath saw his shame and retracted it. The Vianneys did not at once suspect that they were dealing with a heretic, but the language he used, more law-abiding than devotional, did in the end open their eyes. Little by little the faithful dropped off from the old church. The persecution began.

The proscribed priests were hidden. They were given shelter, a disguise, provisions. The people used to appoint secret places for Sunday mass - secret places and far off, with much journeying by night. A barn did for a church, a bread box was the altar. It was forbidden to pray aloud, since the priest was risking the scaffold and his congregation the galleys. It was really worth while to be a Christian in those days.

These were no ordinary Masses that Jean-Marie heard. It was the same sacrifice, but at its highest value, since the gift of the Blood of God bore with it the gift of oneself. "What is a priest?" the child queried. A man who accepts death in order to remain one. Obviously, the priesthood was a very high, very splendid function - death certainly gave a wider meaning to life.

The village was gloomy enough while the church bells hung silent.

The little statue of Our Lady that Jean-Marie took to bed with him every evening had to be carefully hidden, along with the images of saints and the crucifix. God had been exiled from France. The child may well have promised to bring Him back.

We no longer, in our frenzied century, envy the conditions of the little shepherd boy. For him was silence, solitude, leisure - all that one needs as food for the soul. The men of our day - and who can blame them? - as soon as they can read, take some wretched novelette with them into the fields, and their dreams are all of the cinema. In those more human times, the boys had a stocking in their satchel to knit, which gave them all the more time to look about them, and ensured that all their attention should not be devoted to poaching trout and snaring birds. And they prayed more: or, at any rate, prayer came more natural to them, since they had not learnt that the heavens belong to the airmen. If they were not always very much better, at least no one had taken away from them all possibility of being so - which is why so many shepherd boys and shepherd girls have become friends of God.

When Jean-Marie had got through his knitting, there remained the luxury of praising God. By no means unskilled with his hands, he modelled little statues of the saints, particularly of Our Lady, in clay. He installed her statue in the hollow of an old willow trunk, adorned it with wild flowers and said his rosary before it. It was a curiosity for the neighbouring shepherds, who had already been without the mass for three years. Their parents had not the zeal and the heroism of the Vianneys: the churches being closed, they had simply resigned themselves, with no great difficulty, to giving up their faith. They asked him what he was doing there - who was the nice little woman in clay. When he explained, he found himself taking pleasure in explaining, not through vanity, simply through conviction and through a certain pity for these poor souls. The truths rose miraculously to his lips, truths which he had learned from his mother, from the non-juring priests whose instructions he had followed in secret, without doubt also from God Himself, Who was already lifting him by love to knowledge. The listeners formed a circle, crouching in the grass, he leaning over them. If we had been able to catch one of these impromptu catechisings, we should

have found it, I fancy, not unlike those which he gave thirty years later at the Orphanage of La Providence. He was over sixty, he had converted maybe a hundred thousand sinners, but he still spoke as a child, with his direct tone, his popular way of speech, his naked good sense.

"My children, we must love God above everything.

"We must honour our parents and obey them.

"We must not sin, for sin is an offence against God.

"If we sin, let us repent and hasten to have our souls made clean."

In one of his sermons we find an illustration drawn from the life of a shepherd, the idea of which must surely first have come to him in this valley of Chante-Merle, where already he had begun to feel its profound significance:

"We should do as the shepherds do in the fields during the winter - life is a very long winter: they make a fire; but from time to time they rush out to gather wood from all about to replenish it. If we were like these shepherds and knew how to keep the fire of God's love always replenished with prayer and good works, it would never be extinguished."

The elder ones must occasionally have laughed superiorly, but as he could laugh too, they felt foolish and listened like the rest. This seven-year-old missionary became popular among the shepherds. They no longer refused to recite prayers with him, to sing canticles, to walk in procession - for it had come into his head to carry the statue of Our Lady about the fields behind a rough wooden cross. In this ceremonial game he was the celebrant; he imposed upon all a suitable seriousness and, when it was necessary, silence. His small companions were as convinced as he that in all this they were doing something noble, splendid, meritorious and - better still - illegal.

At the age of eight, he learnt to read. At ten he made his first Confession to one of those priests always under suspicion, who, dressed as laymen, wandered from village to village. The event took place in his house; under the clock, to be precise. He was more than

thirteen when he made his first Communion, with a handful of other children, in a neighbouring château, with the shutters safely closed.

In 1800 the churches were re-opened. God had come back. But many had forgotten Him. Fortunately, Ecully, not far from Dardilly, the birthplace of Jean-Marie's mother, received as curé a truly apostolic man, called M. Bailey. To him fell the honour and the trouble of first suspecting, then encouraging and shaping the saint to be.

M. Bailey would very soon be raised to the altar if God called to it all the assembly of the saints. But He lets us know and honour a tiny handful only, those to whom he assigns a personal and, so to speak, immediate role in the tragedy of our salvation. What with a brother who had apostatised (and who, incidentally, later returned to his senses) and another brother who had died for the Faith, M. Bailey had a soul strong and tested by suffering, exalted by the example of one brother and by the necessity of redeeming the other. Time and again had Satan decimated the company of good harvesters, yet the harvest was great. It was necessary to find and train new labourers.

Père Vianney, as he grew older, needed more workers. Jean-Marie accompanied his elder brother, worked conscientiously, not seldom overdid it. In all this he hardened his body, which was later to take upon itself so many pains, so much labour. But his vocation was always with him. He read the gospels, the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Lives of the Fathers*. He was not impatient; simply he waited for God's time. His mother, who had guessed his secret, persuaded his father to send Jean-Marie to live at Ecully with his aunt, Marguerite Humbert, that he might have a priest to teach him.

We never know what is best. What did these five years of hidden life - wherein he drove the plough as Our Lord drove the plane - bring to this great thin boy, raw-boned and clumsy, who saw the years slip by without bringing him any nearer his goal? A great store, certainly, of resignation, gentleness, perseverance. At the end of the time, practically illiterate, rather less than an elementary schoolboy, barely more than the merest yokel, this ploughman of

nineteen introduced himself to M. Bailey. He, to tell the truth, was not greatly impressed at first; but when he heard him speak so keenly, so clearly, with such grasp (for speech of that sort comes to be in the very blood of a peasantry deeply rooted in the soil of one place), of the only learning that matters, the learning that comes from God, the theologian welcomed him with open arms.

Was it memory that the boy lacked or only training? Was his head really as thick as it seemed? He approached his books like a child picking up a spade, knowing in a general way what to do with it, not strong enough to do it. He tried to overcome this stupidity by the means which all his life he was to employ, and to which he was to owe his most definite victories over the inertia of that human compound wherein mind seems altogether choked up in matter. That means was the mortification of the flesh. At his aunt's table he now ate soup only, and even arranged to have his ladled out before the butter had been put in. He reduced his portion of bread. His works of mercy grew more frequent - thus, one day he exchanged his new boots for the old clogs of a beggar by the wayside. He prayed with every drop of prayer that was in his heart. He watched till it made him ill. But his mind got no brighter and he very nearly gave up.

Then suddenly he took the road. Like Benedict Joseph Labre begging food and bed, he climbed the mountain of La Louvesc to Vivarais. It was there that the Jesuit Father, Saint Francis Regis, died for sinners, and his relics are still venerated there. It might be said of him that he died in the confessional, unceasingly evangelising a people who had fallen back into savagery, overcoming his own stricken body, putting off his death in order to drag with him, up to his very last breath, a few more souls to God. Jean-Marie did not know that Providence held the same destiny in reserve for him. He covered sixty or seventy miles of road and broken track; he fell on his knees before his protector, asking him for advice, for strength, for light. And Saint Francis replied.

Apparently, from the very moment of his return, a veil seemed to lift; a dew from heaven rained down on the thick crust of his memory. He learned, he understood; he grew to realise that he was

not as stupid as he had thought. But scarcely was the one obstacle removed, when another rose in his path.

With the best intentions his biographers have given themselves a world of trouble to find excuses for what the enemies of the Church call his "desertion." Our position is quite clear. If desertion there was, he had a right, he had even a duty, to desert. At the present day the "blood tax" is exacted from every French citizen capable of bearing arms. The last war proved that no one thought of avoiding it, apart from a few cowards and a few fools. But this inexorable law is none the less absurd and monstrous because in the present state of the world it seems to be demanded by the public safety. We accept it with resignation, occasionally with joy, but we have a perfect right to hate it. It is an unmistakable sign of the return to barbarism. Peoples and kings would have regarded it with horror and shame in the more peaceful, more Christian, and, as far as that goes, more civilised days of professional armies. We are not bound to believe that in 1809, when Jean-Marie was called up, the damnable crusade preached and let loose by the Gironde and the senseless campaigns of Napoleon which followed as a direct result, had really cured our peasants of a millennial attitude of mind which had for its support justice, humanity and plain good sense. The abstraction which we call the citizen - whose sufferings, anyhow, are sufficiently concrete - was not yet formed. At any rate, a Christian could not conceive that the servants of the God of peace were under any obligation to engage in a bloody adventure merely because the law of the State demanded it. If the point of view has changed, if in 1914 admirable priests and monks have unhesitatingly drawn the sword for their country, the ghastly necessity is none the less a stain on the century which made it so. Whatever we may hold on this point, it is clear that there is no analogy between the position of a seminarist during the wars of Napoleon and that of a priest fighting before Verdun or on the Marne. Jean-Marie owed it to himself, to his vocation, and to his God to refuse obedience.

So much for the principle of the thing. We may proceed to examine the facts. Young Vianney had received the gifts of the Holy Ghost from the hand of Cardinal Fesch, the Emperor's uncle, who was

confirming the young men and women of his diocese - all the arrears of the Revolution - at the rate of two or three thousand a day. A few weeks later the military administration called him up. In strict justice we should add that by a special privilege Church students were exempt. By this exemption Jean-Marie had already profited for three years. Probably the diocesan authorities had forgotten to make a new declaration on his behalf. All representations were in vain; the War Office was immovable. Spain was resisting, and the Emperor was pressing into his service everything on two legs.

Jean-Marie was resigned. He always was; for in everything he saw the hand of God. If God wanted his blood, then God must have his blood. If God wanted to keep him on earth for other purposes, then God would see to it. He made his way to the headquarters at Lyons; there he fell ill; as his regiment was sent to Roanne, he followed it, but he had to go into hospital. When he was more or less cured, he was enrolled in the contingent which was setting out for the army in Spain.

"So be it! It is the law!" he said to the nursing sister.

He took his rifle and his haversack; but before he started, his passionate love for God led him into a church. He laid down his bundle at the feet of his Lord and Master. He prayed long, too long undoubtedly. When he came out, his detachment was far on its way. He returned to the barracks, explained himself as best he could, was fully and fluently cursed, perhaps even attacked and threatened with prison. Still, they gave him his papers and sent him on to join up as rapidly as might be.

The poor infantryman did his best, but he could not make up the lost time. He began to fear that he had taken the wrong road. He stopped one evening in the mountains of Le Forez to rest a little under the trees. Taking advantage of his weariness, a man - no, it was not the devil in disguise - came to tempt him.

"Are you a soldier?" said the unknown.

"Yes, sir."

"You are rejoining your regiment?"

"True."

"You are not going to set out again straight away?"

"It would be beyond me."

"Right, come with me. I know a place where you could sleep in comfort."

This man, by name Guy, was a deserter. Jean-Marie followed him, was overcome with sleep, and let himself be persuaded next day of the sheer impossibility, with the best will in the world, of catching up the rearguard. What could he do? It was the will of God, which had made him a soldier and now made him a deserter.

He remained in hiding for two years.

In the hamlet of Les Robins, near the village of Les Noes, in wooded country where it was easy to evade the gendarmes, he had the good luck to find a mayor secretly in revolt against the imperial government. The worthy magistrate was already keeping two deserters in his own home. He hesitated to take a third, but finally had the idea of placing him with his cousin, Claudine Fayot.

Jean-Marie passed two months in a stable, not at all a bad place to meditate on the Nativity. Then, under the name of Jerome Vincent, he was introduced to the children as a young cousin on his way through. In the evening he gave them lessons. By day he did his own work and a few odd jobs inside the house. He seldom put his nose outside the door, and had of necessity to do without mass. He lived over again the alarms of his childhood, when the authorities made search for a hidden curé in his father's house. Many a time he had to dive into the barn to escape the police. One day, we are told, a zealous gendarme drove the end of his sabre into him, while he was poking about in a stack of hay.

In the beginning his incredible piety had staggered his hosts; but he rapidly won them over, and when he had to go, everybody wept. To

the end of his life, he considered his "cousins" as a second family. In his true family at Dardilly they had given up all hope of seeing him again. He prudently remained a whole year without giving them any news. But, obviously, this could not go on. Finally, they redeemed him by offering in his place his youngest brother, who agreed to enlist before his proper time, on consideration of a sum of three thousand francs to come to him from Jean-Marie.

That was the end of the incident: of which one of the saint's friends said, "Whether because of his own good faith, whether he was persuaded that there had been a supernatural intervention, he had never believed that his conscience was chargeable."

God does not let the mighty ones of the earth fritter away His elect, nor thwart His designs.

Jean-Marie returned in time to see his poor mother die. He confided his intention to her that she might bring it to God. Nor did she fail, for M. Bailey took his pupil back. He offered to provide him with bed and board and to prepare him to enter as soon as possible the Petit Seminaire of Verrieres. In this seminary, which had been reopened in secret, in spite of the decrees by which the Emperor showed his displeasure with the Bishops and with Rome, the level of studies was very low. Jean-Marie's knowledge was lower still. He was older than his teacher, and less learned than the youngest pupil. He became the butt of his fellows in the philosophy class, but he liked being laughed at, and in spite of all he continued to hope. He prayed as excellently as he worked badly.

There he made the acquaintance of another who aspired to the most saintly standard of life, Marcellin Champagnat, a backward pupil like himself. Perhaps each was the only one to discern in the other the mark of God's hand, which was worth more to them than all this world's knowledge. They made a common stock of their two inadequacies.

They met again at Saint Irenee, the Grand Seminaire of Lyons. But there they found less patience. Goodness of will was of no avail, when it remained so completely without any visible results. After six months' trial they sent Jean-Marie away. After all, what could

anybody do with a would-be priest, so thoroughly recalcitrant in the matter of Latin?

Then for want of anything better he thought of becoming a lay brother in the Society of the Brothers of Christian Doctrine. But once again M. Bailey brought him back. He took him into his own home, devoted all his time and all his patience to him, and had the audacity to send him in as a candidate for minor orders. He offered himself as a guarantor of his worth, which nobody but he could possibly have suspected. Alas, the poor lad lost his head, answered wildly, failed to impress the examiners! But M. Bailey stuck to it. He obtained the favour of another examination, and this went just a little better. Finally, they decided to refer the matter to the Archbishop, but following the Emperor's abdication, Cardinal Fesch had been forced to leave Lyons in a hurry. His Vicar-General acted as deputy- a devout, simple man, who was only concerned with the piety of the young man brought before him. There were so few priests for so many empty parishes! As to his piety, M. Bailey answered for that.

"Good," said the Vicar-General. "The grace of God will do the rest."

The secret of the continued miracle of success which we are painting is that from beginning to end it was carried through, supported, solely and entirely explained, by grace. On the human side, nothing; from God, everything.

Thus, on the Feast of the Visitation, in the Church of Saint Jean of Lyons, the seminarist Vianney received, by special favour, all the minor orders and the sub-diaconate from the hands of Mgr. Simon, come for that purpose from the Isere. Next year in the same place the same prelate ordained him deacon. Only a few months afterwards, Jean-Marie went on foot to Grenoble to be ordained priest - and again it was Monsignor Simon. The ceremony took place in the Chapel of the Grand Seminaire, and he was the only one ordained. Even then they made one reservation; he was so backward in moral theology that the faculties of a confessor were not granted him till very much later.

The great event - for great event it was - is to be found in its place in the world's history under the date 13th of August, 1815, rather

less than two months after Waterloo. The next day, the Vigil of the Assumption, the peasant Jean-Marie mounted to the altar to offer to God the Sacrifice of God's Son and the sacrifice of himself.

The Conversion of a Village

Before being sent to Ars, the Abbé Vianney spent three years as curate to M. Bailey in the parish of Ecully. "You wished him to be ordained," the authorities seemed to say. "You got your way; so keep him!"

At any rate that is really the meaning, if not quite the actual wording, of the message sent by certain of the Archbishop's satellites, canons and that sort of people, who had some little influence in clerical appointments. But, as it happened, his old master was only too anxious to have him, since he knew from hard experience that no other rector would be able to make head or tail of the new curate.

At Ecully, M. Vianney had relations; he had already lived there some time, was known there, was well liked. The place was simply waiting for him. It is worth noting that, wherever he went, simple people guessed what he was sooner than the learned and instinctively offered him special reverence. He had scarcely arrived, when he was besieged. His preaching was no more than average, and crowds thronged to his sermons. He had not faculties to hear confession, and everybody wanted his counsel. Almost overnight he found himself an object of the world's regard. What a spectacle! And what terror in it!

He passed his life fleeing from the world. At eleven, he was begging God for solitude. Then at least, he lived almost enclosed, with good people or at least well-meaning people. Of mortal sin he knew only from books. His chastity he guarded intensely, from his childhood refusing the caresses of the little girls, his playmates. And now he found himself face to face with a wounded world, spreading the wounds of its sin before him, mortal wounds often enough, crawling with obscene life. Had he any suspicion when he became a priest that he was exposing himself to all this? In the presence of evil did he not himself feel the shameful prick of original sin? Once one knows evil, it is less easy to resist it.

The Abbé Vianney later on half admitted this temptation, when he

revealed to a close friend that at this time, in order to drive away impure imaginations, he had made a vow to say the Regina Coeli and a prayer to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception every day. "Thus," he added, "I was set free for ever." But following the example of M. Bailey, he added mortification so frightful that both of them drew down a reprimand from their Vicar-General. His food was of the grossest; he wore a hair shirt; of set purpose he lingered by the side of men stricken with contagious diseases; he refused his body the barest shadow of a consolation. As his most recent biography beautifully puts it, in the words of Saint Francis de Sales, he chastised his body so well that he obtained the sublime gift "of seeing everybody without looking at anybody." Faces, hands, bodies are for him now only expressions of the soul; they have no longer any beauty but that which the soul prints on them.

Following the definitely monastic rule adopted at the presbytery, the Abbé Vianney resumed his study of Theology, but in a practical way, with an eye to immediate needs. His master proposed the most delicate and most obscure cases of conscience, and was amazed at the sureness with which he unravelled them. Then he realised that his lessons could do practically nothing more than bring to the surface a gift already implanted by the Holy Ghost in the mind of the young curate, and he begged the authorities of the diocese to give him the faculties which would enable souls to take advantage of it.

Once the Abbé Vianney was given permission to hear confessions, his first penitent was his own rector; so that he who was later to hear the confessions of thousands upon thousands of sinners - and sinners deeply stained - began his work by hearing the confession of a saint.

A saint always thinks that he is a sinner. Even by comparison with the ordinary human standard, he is always so to some slight extent, and obviously more so by the standard of the perfection of holiness which is always before him. M. Bailey before his death handed over his instruments of penance to Jean-Marie.

"Here, my poor Vianney," he said, as we find related by the Abbé Monnin, "hide them. If people found them after my death they would believe that I had done something by way of expiation for

my sins, and so they would leave me in Purgatory till the end of the world."

If a saint speaks thus, it is not easy to save one's soul. That was the moral to be drawn and the principle from which the life of penance and of apostolic labour flowed for the young priest who had just lost the guide he guided; that was the living example by which he was to live: the golden reed by which he was henceforth to measure others - and to measure himself. Memories like this are a precious heirloom, but heavy with responsibility. With his three-cornered hat, his old coat, a few sticks of furniture - just that and no more - the Abbé Vianney set off next day for an obscure village of Les Dombes to which he had just been appointed.

He left the region of his birth, never again to see it, save for one brief space.

From this necessarily rapid sketch wherein are summarised thirty-two years of life - of life, too, in the fields - many will accuse us of having left out the scenery. We do not claim that Jean-Marie Vianney did not love his country or that he always remained untouched by the sunny splendour of the Lyonnais where he was born, grew, became a man. His catechisms are packed with allusions to the splendours of the natural world. But we do not think that this world's beauty played the smallest part in forming him. A saint, be he the Curé d'Ars, Francis de Sales or Francis of Assisi, does not use nature for his own delight. He does not adore it, that being a weakness which he leaves to poets. For him it never rises above the lowest rank in the hierarchy of true splendours. He regards it as a handbook from which he may draw comparisons for instruction, arguments which may convince men and teach them to pray better. For our little abbe, tramping with downcast eyes towards his new destiny, the visible world might almost not exist. He has taken what he needs, he expects no more and God uses him as He pleases.

The new district varied between sheer ugliness and sheer plainness. You climb the heights that ring the broad and fertile valley of the Saone, between Villefranche and Trevoux; you stop on the very edge of the gloomy plain of Les Dombes which spreads out its steel-

coloured lakes fanwise in the direction of Belley and Bourg-en-Bresse. You have left behind the pleasant orchards of the Lyonnais, and stop short of the wide spaces of Les Dombes filled with mirages. Midway between is a little transition region - on one side still pleasant, on the other showing the first signs of poverty, but, by comparison with its two neighbours, featureless, not greatly joyful, not greatly gloomy, not greatly anything.

You see a gently rolling landscape, full of abrupt slopes running all ways, making no sort of pattern: meadows, fields, bushes, clumps of trees, all put, no matter how, no matter where, haphazard. There is just one delicious corner, where a stream runs over its pebbles, shaded by alders and willows. On one bank is the village, cutting off the horizon towards the north. On the other is the château, surrounded by high trees. Here and there a gap, with a clear view - when the mist lets you see so far - right through to the Mont d'Or and the hills of the Beaujolais.

The château, a gloomy building, is in red brick, the red jarring with the green of the trees. The village is built of clay of a uniform greyish-yellow. Its straggling lines of roofs overhang a couple of streets which meet at a piece of rising ground. On this rising ground is perched the church, the poor church with its one nave and wooden steeple, closely neighboured by the presbytery on the Gospel side and the cemetery on the Epistle side; behind is a field of sorts with some walnut trees. Every house in the village keeps to itself; no window looks out. Behind the high gates lies an orchard, a farmyard, from which in the morning drift out four or five cows, a few sheep, a goat or two. Not to be overlooked are several cabarets.

And that is everything.

It is said that when he arrived at the edge of his new parish by a road that is now used only by farm labourers, M. Vianney fell on his knees in prayer. He probably found some consolation in the tininess of the village; we are told that he prayed to its guardian angel, but a wild idea - his own modest phrase for his inspirations - flashed through his head. This particular idea might have seemed to be inspired solely by a spirit of pride. The mystery is probably no more than this, that a saint knew himself called to bring about great things and said so without boastfulness. At any rate, this was his

prophecy: "This parish will not be able to hold all those who later will come to it."

An old woman came with him. A few sticks of furniture followed on a cart. A road so difficult to follow spoke eloquently of the isolation of all that region. First of all he entered the church. It was humble, which pleased him. It was dilapidated, which to him seemed shameful. It was simply a high, square room, pierced by narrow windows, with a cracked roof and rotting woodwork. It was not worthy of God.

He noticed with satisfaction that the presbytery was next door, but when he saw that it was furnished with comparative luxury - "Six high-backed leather chairs, and an armchair of the same set, an armchair covered in green and red, etc." - he made up his mind to give back all these beautiful things to the charitable lady - it was in fact the lady at the château - who had lent them to his predecessor: he could make shift with such furniture as he already had - something to sit upon, to eat at, to sleep on, like the peasant that he was and had every intention of remaining.

Then he set about discovering the most important thing.

The Vicar-General had said to him: "My friend, you have been appointed Curé of Ars. It is a little parish where there is not much love of God; you must put some into it."

Neither better nor worse than another! It, too, had suffered from the Revolution, and owing to its distance from everywhere it had been subsequently left to itself even more thoroughly perhaps than most places. For a time the people had forgotten to believe; after the Concordat they began glimmeringly to remember. If a few freethinkers spilled rhetoric in the cabarets, practically all the women went to Mass on Sunday, and even a few men. But human respect, previously unknown, took its toll. New priests had managed to save something of the forms, without daring to set about any fundamental rebuilding.

The grossness of manners which springs from a time of disorder had not spared this forgotten corner. They drank to excess; they

overslept; they danced at any excuse, and they needed no excuse for swearing. Nobody minded bringing in his hay on Sunday. Even in the sphere of natural ethics there were no very clear distinctions between what was allowable and what was forbidden. Nobody bothered to find out his duties, nor indeed to do anything else. They were soaked in ignorance. A curé of no great zeal, too quickly resigned to choosing the lesser evil, regarding this state of mediocrity as the highest standard that one could expect at such a time, would have considered that he had done well if he could have succeeded in maintaining it. M. Vianney thought otherwise, and very soon said so.

"Does God exist or doesn't He? If He exists we must honour Him as He requires us to honour Him, or we shall be asked why."

A saint is never broad-minded. A saint never compromises. Tender of conscience for himself, he is equally tender for others. He does not think that the word "indulgence" covers everything, for sin is sin. Others speak of it; he sees it - sees it almost physically, as a devouring leprosy, as the first spark of the everlasting fire. Poor little country priest, had he come to save souls or had he not? Did he love them as his own? With his own soul shivering in his meagre body, do you think that he would let others sleep quiet in false security? He is as responsible to God for his flock as he was to his father for the handful of sheep that he used to take out to pasture. And if the full number is not there when evening comes? If a single ewe caught in the brambles suffers through his fault? If truth is inescapable, of what use is it to anybody to try to whittle it down?

Like Saint Vincent Ferrier, the apostle of thunder, the Curé d'Ars, the tenderest of hearts, the most merciful of men, the least made to hurl anathemas, through tenderness and mercy set out to preach the gospel of fear.

As yet no one had any suspicion of it. He made the usual round of visits; almost everywhere he was received with friendliness. After all, they hadn't expected anyone very special - bishops are not in the habit of sending eagles into the country. A very pious man, very simple, very timid, acquainted with the labours of the fields - so they saw him. He would pray in his corner and not disturb people. They would exchange small services - chat with him from time to

time, even perhaps go a shade more frequently to Mass, because he appeared to attach some importance to it, and nobody would like to hurt his feelings! Yes, no doubt, an acquisition.

At the end of his visiting M. Vianney knew all that as well as his parishioners. He had made discreet enquiries as to their situation, their occupations, their way of life. He was skilled enough by well chosen remarks to provoke information or that silence which reveals so much more. So that he knew quite precisely what each soul had made of the gift received at Baptism. The picture was not brilliant. Out of fifty families there were five or six really devout, in addition to the lady of the château, Mile, des Garets, a holy woman by any standard. Clearly the kind of disease that demanded a desperate remedy. He went up into the pulpit on Sunday, and this is something of what he said:

"Christ wept over Jerusalem. . . . I weep over you. How can I help weeping, my brethren? Hell exists. It is not my invention. God has told us. And you pay no heed. . . . you do all that is necessary to be sent to it. You blaspheme the Name of God. You spend your evenings in the cabarets. You give yourselves to the sinful pleasures of dancing. You steal from your neighbour's field. You do a world of things which are offences against God. Do you think then that God does not see you? He sees you, my children, as I see you, and you shall be treated accordingly. What misery! Hell exists. I beg you: think of hell. Do you think that your curé will let you be cast into hell to burn there for ever and ever! Are you going to cause this suffering to your curé?

He had learnt his sermon with great trouble; but he did not recite it, he lived it - without anger, without violence, his voice and his eyes full of tears. We may imagine that the congregation was surprised. What? Is that the same man? The same who spoke so sensibly about land, and ploughs, and cattle? The same who appeared so sympathetic to the body's sufferings, who could give you good prescriptions to cure whooping-cough? Truly, he entered into the heart of his subject and into the heart of his hearers. He accused, he threatened. And it was not merely vain words in the air. He meant what he said. He demanded what he demanded. He demanded every iota that God demands. Surely this kind of thing passed

reason? But he pronounced these words of terror so sadly and so gently that no one could be angry. What! it was necessary to change one's life? That needed thinking about - it had been out of mind too long.

M. Vianney did not relax. The next Sunday he returned to the charge, insisted, was even stronger. He leant over the top of his pulpit like an angel come to destroy and to save. His long hair, the strong bones of his face sweeping down from an enormous forehead, deeply furrowed, the hollow cheeks, a thin and sensitive nose with nostrils that quivered passionately, a mouth with the smile of a child, and an imperious chin, his blue eyes holding you and looking through you, his bony hands pointing at eternity, the whole goes to make an unforgettable picture that a man might love to gaze upon in real life, if he did not begin - and with cause - to be afraid of it.

Thus he would take for his theme, for example, the Gospel account of the Last Judgment, particularly that terrible word which dominates the whole: "Depart ye cursed."

"Cursed by God! How frightful a disaster! My children, do you understand? Cursed by God, by God Who loves to bless! Cursed by God, Who is goodness itself! Cursed without remission, cursed eternally! Cursed by God!"

No one thought of smiling, for he was in tears; he was crushed like the sinner under the maledictions that he was uttering.

"When the end of the world comes," he went on, "each parishioner will meet his pastor and Our Lord Jesus Christ will say: 'Pastor, curse them!' 'What, Lord, am I to curse the children that I have baptized to you?' 'I tell you, Pastor, curse them!' 'I, Lord, curse the children whom I have taught for you, to whom I have given your holy Body, to whom I have distributed the Bread of your Word?' The Pastor will say what he has done for them. Our Lord Jesus Christ will reply: 'Pastor, they did not listen to you enough; curse them. I command you, curse them.' Ah, my brethren, what grief for a pastor! You do not believe me? Yet it will be; yes, it will be."

We may be tempted to find this religion too hard. But while the

congregation stood shuddering in the depths of hell, suddenly he snatched it up and carried it on his shoulders to the very threshold of the temple where Saint Simeon holds the child Jesus in his arms, to the Communion table where we receive God in body and soul, to Mount Tabor where He shows Himself transfigured, clad in the whiteness of snow and silver. "Come ye blessed of my Father!"

On that side also the word has been spoken, and nothing can prevail against it. Without that, an eternity of suffering is unthinkable. The time of preparation is past and God's sickle sweeps us into His harvest.

"We shall see God," cried the poor priest, "we shall see Him! Have you ever thought on that, my brethren? We shall see God, we shall see Him direct. We shall see Him as He is, face to face!"

One might think that already he saw Him and could not turn his face away. An eye-witness tells us that on one occasion, as though lost in his ecstasy, he kept on saying over a space of several minutes: "We shall see Him!" "We shall see Him!"

In all this we are very far from religion as a habit, religion as a bulwark of law and order, religion as a policeman on duty over morals, religion as an occasion of smugness, even religion as overflowing pity. For this there is no adjective - it is religion pure and simple, religion for itself- that is, for God. Truly, "this is a hard saying." The Jews thought so, and said so long ago. It is the Word, that which by its very definition contradicts. Through it a lukewarm parish was recalled to fervour, brought back on to the plane of its eternal and supernatural destiny - and that almost overnight. The district of Ars is that bridge over the river which leads to damnation or to glory. Heaven is a reality, hell is a reality, half-belief is no belief.

As it worked out, his task was nothing less than to root out of this land ignorance, apathy and lack of conscience, blasphemy, impurity, lying and the frenzied hunt for pleasure - and to replace them by modesty, temperance, honesty and a love for the things of God. But, you say, if he demands so much, the luckless priest will obtain nothing. Another sermon or two like the last, and he will have an empty church to preach to. People may be gripped for the

time, but they will take very good care not to come back. Then M. Vianney will take a less lofty tone and will preach salvation - on easier terms!

So began the drama of his life as curé.

We have seen that he set up his abode in the presbytery next door to the church. It was a house of one storey, squat and unpretentious, with a yard which lengthened out into a garden. At one time this was enclosed by a quickset hedge, well supplied with fruit trees. Now one sees only an ancient sapless elder. M. Vianney had the trees cut down to remove from the small boys of the countryside an occasion of theft, and later the hedge was replaced by a wall. For the rest, the place is just as it was on his first day, and the imagination need make no great effort to see the old priest wandering about, or lighting his lamp in the evening at the first floor window. Thus it was that his parishioners saw him. He had practically no secrets from them - and from the very day of his arrival his mode of life shocked them. Apart from the kitchen downstairs and the bedroom upstairs, he abandoned all the rooms in the house. He had neither servant girl nor housekeeper - he wished no one to live with him. Mere Bibost, whom he had brought from Ecully, used to come in of a day to sweep the bedroom. Following out his decision, he gave back to Mile, des Garets the furniture which she lent so willingly, including, of course, the kitchen utensils, and, so we are told, the oven. He kept a saucepan, a bookshelf, a table, a few seats, a bed.

The good people of Ars, like the good people of every other place, felt it right that a curé, whatever his origin, should be a kind of gentleman, who owed it to his position, and whose parishioners owed it to his position, to see that he had a certain degree of ease and comfort. A curé must look the part. A curé has a position to maintain.

It is customary for him to receive his fellow priests at his table and dine them well. Was M. Vianney to break the tradition? Did he propose to tarnish that renown which clerical meals have justly enjoyed from the beginning of the Christian era - or at any rate, from within two or three hundred years thereafter? M. Vianney

knew what he was about. He let them talk. The one thing he saw quite clearly was that the devil was installed in the village and must be driven out. He drew up his plan of campaign.

Bit by bit his bed, which still looked well under its curtained canopy, was simplified, so to speak. One day the mattress went to a poor man who was ill; the pillow and the bolster went the same road. A board and some thin sacking kept their place under the bedclothes - nobody suspected it, for the curé made his own bed. He slept there, too - there or somewhere else, sometimes in the barn, his head lying on a beam, sometimes in the kitchen on a heap of wood. Before going to bed he flogged himself strenuously, with a knotted cord helped out with a few spikes and leaden balls - for an hour together, so a neighbour tells us, and the woman who washed his clothes bears testimony that the left shoulder of his shirt was "all torn and stained with blood."

But rigours of this sort were too brutal to give him that continued expiation which he felt to be necessary. He read in the Gospel that demons like those which seemed to haunt his parish were not to be cast out by anything but prayer and fasting. He took the Gospel quite simply and literally, going short of food, going short of sleep; he managed to lull two birds with the one stone by devoting to prayer the time which but for his mortifications he would have had to spend in bed and at meals.

Before daybreak he went down into the church. Before the altar where his Lord and Master watched unceasingly, he knelt upright without support, fixed his eyes on the Tabernacle, joined his hands or spread out his arms, prayed, wept, groaned, meditated:

"My God, my all, You see how I love You, and I do not love You enough.

"My God, You have given me all; behold the little that I give You. Give me the strength to give more.

"My God, here is all - take all: but convert my parish. If You do not convert it, it will be because I have not deserved it.

"My God, I count my merits as nothing, but Yours are infinite. May

they win for me the grace of suffering.

"My God, I consent to suffer all that You may wish, for all my life. . . . for a hundred years. . . . and the most bitter suffering, but convert them. . . ."

Sometimes he spoke aloud, and his words were overheard.

At dawn he said his Mass, slowly, almost always with tears, sometimes with a great smile, as though he were addressing the angels gathered about the altar - his own guardian angel, the guardian angel of the parish, the guardian angels of all in his congregation. Joy or suffering? He no longer knew. They are so closely intermingled in the chalice, that the joy of a friend of God resembles suffering, his suffering resembles joy. He continued his thanksgiving endlessly.

Obviously, he could not go without eating altogether. In the morning he had a crust - and another when he thought of it. At mid-day and the evening, one or two cold potatoes - he used to have enough cooked for a week at a time in an iron pot, which is shown to pilgrims; on rare occasions he might even have a third. But this last, as he confessed later, was simply for pleasure. The widow Bibost, who looked after the house, and after her departure the Widow Renard, did their uttermost to improve his menu with little dishes of their own making, which they used to bring between two plates, but he was not to be caught like that twice - either he refused to open the door, or else he declared that any addition to his meal would make him ill.

Occasionally he substituted for his potatoes either an egg cooked in the ashes or one of those black corn cakes which are called in the country-side *mâte-faim* - killers of hunger - a grimly appropriate word. In every possible way he tried to kill his, as, for instance, so we are told, by trying to live on nothing but sorrel - "but I could not keep it up," he said; or by remaining in Lent three days at a time without food. Meal time gave him a chance to pay visits in his parish. He knew that he would find his people at table. He did not sit down. He spoke and he let them speak. The closest intimacy grew easily in that environment.

After that he would go for a walk in the fields, falling on his knees suddenly to pray, kissing the ground, trying to engrave on his memory the exact text of his next sermon. When he got back to his room, or more often to the sacristy, he laboured over these poor shreds of eloquence in an agony of despair. For hours in the morning, for hours during the day; again in the evening as late as he could bear. The deprivation of sleep, the hardest to bear, the most meritorious, was the one he embraced most willingly. Like Saint Francis of Assisi, he wore down the beast, Brother Ass, only making pause when it could bear him no longer.

Such was the way of his life for ten years together - a battle day after day unswerving, bitter, a battle won each day, a battle to be won afresh each day, with no hope of ever being finished for good with the enemy of mankind, who has come upon earth to tempt men and who will tempt them till the day of judgment.

But temptation is not sin. It is a trial which adds to man's strength, arming him against sin and redeeming the sins of others. Further, it is the unceasing proof of the constant help of grace, which makes a sort of hero of a poor priest.

Before him and in him he had Our Lord and the saints. He read their lives with passionate devotion in the gospels, in the breviary, in an old book almost fallen in pieces, which gives us the impression of a collection of fables, but in which everything that happens is exactly as Christ Our Lord promised it would happen. God can do anything through His saints - marvels are attributed to them which they did not do, yet it is great gain for us to know that they could have done them. That was why M. Vianney in his sermons described the most staggering of the miracles - and that is why he was so certain that he could even convert his parish, if it were God's will.

"If you had faith, you would move mountains."

If he had not faith, no one ever had.

Everything gets known in a village. News flies from door to door in an instant. At the château, the old lady, a very pious old lady, who

set herself every day to say the Canonical Hours with her old servant, Saint-Phal, was no longer in doubt about the kind of man she was dealing with. He, who had sent back her furniture, who came into her drawing-room with his great thick shoes, who spoke to her with lowered eyes and never accepted any of the pleasant things she offered him, was not an eccentric but a chosen soul. M. Mandy, the mayor, said point blank with obvious satisfaction, "They have sent us a saint."

The handful of families - Cinier, Chaffangeon, Lassagne, Vercheres - the only ones with any real Christianity up to that time, closed in about their new curé, feeling strongly that he would need their help. With certain others, less fervent, an attraction they could not explain took the place of curiosity and counterbalanced their fear. For the men M. Vianney re-established the Confraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament. Some of the girls he grouped in a Confraternity of the Rosary. Catechism classes were started for the children, taking place in the early morning from six o'clock, before work; he demanded that they should be present regularly, properly clad, with full attention. The most punctual was to be rewarded with a statue. There was nothing he loved more than to awaken these fresh young souls, to plough and sow the virgin field. He had received the gift of being as a child, and he knew how to speak to children on their own level.

Here he was under no constraint. He felt more at his ease than in the pulpit; he could speak conversationally. But the religion he taught was in no sense scaled down. God must be served first.

"There are many Christians who do not know why they are in the world. Oh, my God, why have You placed me in the world?"

"To save you."

"And why do You wish to save me?"

"Because I love you."

"God has created us and placed us in the world because He loves us. To save our souls, we must know, love and serve God. How beautiful a life! How beautiful, how great, to know, to love, to serve

God. We have nothing but that to do in this world. Anything whatever that we do apart from that is waste of time.

"Worldly people say that it is too difficult to save one's soul. Yet there is nothing easier: keep the Commandments of God and the Church, and avoid the Seven Deadly Sins; or, to put it another way, do good and avoid evil. . . . Here is a good rule of conduct. Do only what one can offer to God."

In all this, what purity, what lucidity - words used for nothing but for the thought that they convey. What strength, too, in the thought! "Do only what one can offer to God." The child who fixes this rule in his memory and keeps it ever before him is certain, without any other teaching, to attain by the time he comes to die the fulness of the Christian life. For the children of his congregation as for their elders, M. Vianney set a standard no lower than his own.

To attract people to his church, he made up his mind to improve its appearance - which would not only attract people, but would also make it less unworthy of God. There, again, you have a point in his character. For himself he had a soutane, a hat, a neck-band, a pair of shoes: one of each, to be worn to the bitter end; and he never had a cloak. Nothing, he held, is too ugly, too worn out, too wretched for the man; nothing is too splendid for the minister of God. When he mounted to the altar, he was ready to cover his humility with all the treasures of Golconda - if they had been put at his disposal. He could never find any ornaments splendid enough to clothe the priest when he represented God, the High Priest. Of all the money that he was to receive in the future - and he received a great deal - what did not go to the poor was poured out with splendid generosity for the beautifying of these services to the honour of God. Chasubles, altar linen, candelabra, statues - he refused none of them. In the beginning it was urgently necessary to repair and strengthen the church, if possible to enlarge it, for all that the worshippers did not yet by any means fill it.

In 1830 the wooden steeple was replaced by a square tower of red brick. Antique columns in the Roman style were built to support the double windows. A second bell was hung, and baptized, "The Bell of the Holy Rosary." Inside, a first chapel was opened to the right of

the nave in honour of the Blessed Virgin - her statue decorated with handsome wooden panels, carved in relief with sheaves of wheat and bunches of grapes. Opposite, a little later, a second was built for Saint John the Baptist. This time M. Vianney found himself short of funds, and just as his carpenter was pressing for payment, some person unknown, who had no knowledge of his difficulty, sent him the necessary money. Nevertheless, in the years that followed he decided not to tempt Heaven, buying only pictures and statues- for he wished that the saints, of whom he spoke so much to his congregation, should be living realities to them - Saint Joseph, Saint Peter, Saint Sixtus, Saint Blaize, Saint Michael the Archangel (and many an angel beside), Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Philomena, Saint Benedict Joseph Labre. He also acquired an Ecce Homo. And so his little church was populated. It was heaven on a small scale.

For all these decorations, Mlle. des Garets acted the part of Providence. Perhaps, too, she guided him in his choice. M. Vianney, who apparently had not a trace of artistic education, acquired nothing, or practically nothing, that was not of sound taste, as we may judge by what he has left behind at Ars. In particular, a gilt wooden statue, at which miracles have been worked, a statue of the Queen of Heaven with rays of gold springing from her hands, is a marvel of its sort. Perhaps, like certain other saints, he possessed a mysterious sense which made him prefer the more beautiful as being more true. Assuredly you would have embarrassed the poor priest considerably if you had asked him to define the beautiful. But it must not be forgotten that God was to grant him visions which were not exclusively intellectual. We may well suppose that they were of as much value as human masterpieces, and could form the taste of a simple soul, free from convention and prejudice.

Even when the other three chapels - those of Saint Philomena, of the Holy Angels, and of the Ecce Homo - were built, when the front of the church, the antique pediment, the two balustrades and the flight of stairs were rebuilt, the original church lost none of its essential humility. Even its treasures - a point to be remembered in their favour - move us less than the two little plain wooden chairs - the one perched on two irons, S-shaped, from which the curé delivered his sermons, the other on a step where he taught the children catechism. Here everything takes the form and colour of

prayer, and all is stripped away save adoration.

The result of these first efforts, was that people paid visits to the sanctuary more willingly and more regularly. A curé who does not eat and does not sleep, who gives everything away, who prays as no one has ever been known to pray, who says his mass like an angel, and who decorates his church, is a phenomenon so surprising that one is bound to be a little proud of it. One may well excuse his being somewhat exacting and one may well try to do what would please him.

So few men went to Communion at Easter that he was plunged in sorrow, and sorrowfully he told them why.

When it was time to bring in the harvest, many gave themselves a dispensation from mass. He told them very plainly that it was scandalous and doubly scandalous, both to work on Sunday and to miss mass.

He met a drunken man who swore; another not drunk who swore likewise. "You are then brute beasts, my children?"

They prepared a "vogue," otherwise a local festival. Behind the church, between the walnut trees, they hung garlands of leaves and flowers. At night the lamps were lit; boys and girls arrived arm in arm, singing. They danced all night, and all the unions that resulted did not finish in church. M. Vianney saw and heard. No matter what he thought - but God?

Obviously he must return to the charge. It was necessary to apply the red hot iron to the diseased part. Had people who were continually offending God any right to a place in God's church? M. Vianney took them to task from the pulpit, put them to shame in public. He did not mind upsetting a score, if thereby he might but convince two of them.

"God has given us bread for our bodies. He has given us His body for our souls. You are very pleased to have the bread He gives. Why do you refuse His body? Sunday is God's property, His own day, the Lord's day. He has made all the days of the week. He might have

kept them all, but he has given you six and has reserved to Himself only the seventh. By what right do you touch what does not belong to you?

"The cabaret is the devil's shop, the school where hell pours forth and teaches its doctrine; the place where souls are put up for sale, where families are ruined, where health is spoilt, where quarrels begin, where murders are committed. . . . Ah, cabaret-keepers! the devil does not torment them much! He despises them and spits on them."

Speaking of dancing, he said: "My brethren, Christians who go into a dance-room leave their guardian angel at the door, and it is a devil who takes his place, so that very soon there are as many devils as dancers in the room."

As they heard these statements, these appeals, these anathemas, those who had drunk or blasphemed, those who worked on Sunday and those who did not perform their Easter duties, those who missed mass and did not miss the dance, blushed and held their heads low. They felt upon them the reproach of the little band of faithful souls which their pastor had already managed to gather about him. And when they returned to their sin, they no longer found themselves comfortable at it.

The reason was that this devil of a man - if so one may style him - stood no nonsense from those who wished to evade the rules. Always going and coming across the fields and along the streets, he seemed to see nothing and in fact missed nothing. With eyes closed he would go to the exact place where some sin was about to be committed, as though he had seen it in advance, had even scented it. After all, is it not common knowledge that for the saints sin has a smell?

One Sunday in summer he went by a hay waggon, behind which the waggoner was hiding. He remarked to him jestingly: "You are very upset to find me here, my friend. But the good God sees you always. He it is that you must fear.

Further on a peasant was taking his daughter to a dance. He began to make excuses, stammered, defended himself as best he might,

made no hand of it.

"I shall not let her dance," he said.

"Oh!" the priest said ironically, "If she doesn't dance, her heart will."

He did not hesitate to refuse absolution to those who persevered in their fault. They might revolt once or even twice, but in the end practically all submitted. Naturally the old submitted first, having less passion and more good sense than the young. They realised that one did not grow richer by Sunday work, still less by going too often to the cabaret or by extravagant spending. At Ars there were four cabarets, and the owners - particularly those whose places were near the church - complained. One in particular told M. Vianney that he was ruining him. The curé got together a small sum of money - enough to buy a cottage and a piece of land - and he closed his cabaret.

Against the dancing mania, which swept the whole country, M. Vianney resorted to heroic remedies. One morning he set off along the road to meet the violinist.

"How much do they give you?" he asked.

He gave the man double and sent him away. The hour of the dance arrived- they had to do without music. The young men swore and lost their temper. They decided to make the best of it and dance without the fiddle. One of them offered to sing - but that proved to be not quite the same thing. The girls were reluctant, though some let themselves be dragged on to the floor against their will. But no one put any heart into it. They did their best to force some appearance of gaiety, crying out and stamping their feet in a sort of fury. And M. Vianney calmly came out of his garden as though he meant simply to go into the church. He said nothing. He was not going to say anything. His appearance, armed with his poor spiritual thunders or simply with his silent reproach, was quite sufficient. Song and dance ceased together, and the crowd dispersed - "like a flock of sparrows," we are told.

The more determined spirits went further afield to dance, but only a few of them. The battle was over. At any rate, the house of God

would not suffer again from their nearness. And, indeed, after this very impressive victory they even gave up dancing under the walnut trees on the esplanade. A decree of the mayor soon made it illegal, and the cabarets near the church had to close their doors for want of customers. The evil did, as we have said, go further afield, but it was now only superficial.

From all this we may judge just how strong was the power that the curé had gained over his parish. Henceforth the heart of the village was the property of God. Obviously there had to be some new arrangement to fit circumstances so very much altered. There is no denying that a Sunday without pleasure is a tedious business. M. Vianney got them to love Vespers. After Vespers he suggested a Rosary. The habit appeared pleasing, and soon, to the best of the young women, it became a necessity, and acted as a new bond of union among them. Later he invited them to gather cherries in his garden; they were free to enjoy themselves - while he withdrew to his room. When they had had enough of the pastime, he brought them together in the kitchen to give them a reading from the marvellous history of some saint. All this time dancing was going on at the other end of the village, and some of the girls were heavy at heart to be missing it.

"Are you not happier here?"

Possibly they were. The notion of joy underwent some changes. M. Vianney set about substituting the innocent and untroubled mirth of the children of God for the gross pleasures of the world. The first sort has at least the advantage that one does not weary of it. Very soon it had come to this, that even on weekdays people never missed coming to church to recite the evening prayers.

This campaign against the spirit of the age lasted more than ten years, but it had to end in complete victory. Cheapjacks disappeared from the esplanade together with the people who ran the dances; cabarets might open again, but could do no business. There were no more drunkards in the district, and the graceless girls who went off to festivals in the neighbouring villages were received on their return with the soundest of thrashings.

There were outcries, naturally; a few of the young men, in their

exasperation, set up the standard of revolt. Not daring to attack their curé openly, they made up slanderous stories and spread them broadcast - accusing him, among other things, of attracting girls to his house for immoral purposes, and of spending his nights in debauchery - that being the reason, as they triumphantly pointed out, of his thinness and pallor. He was a luxurious liver, a hypocrite. What with anonymous letters, obscene songs, wild beating of pots and pans in front of the presbytery, his persecution was fairly thorough. Seven of his parishioners came to him in a body, saying that he must leave the village. The story is even told that a woman of the streets came night after night beneath his windows, accusing him, with a flood of unclean insults, of being the father of her child. In the morning when he came out of his house he often found his door bespattered with filth.

After all, anyone who sets up God against Satan must expect reprisals, and M. Vianney knew it. He let the hurricane blow past, gathering his little flock closer about him, seeing it grow by a new soul every day. He did not contradict the slanderers, he did not leave his post. Thanks be to God, no one could undo the good he had done, provided that he continued to strengthen the edifice with prayers, tears, fasting, watching and the shedding of blood. He would re-enter his room, deafened by the howling of his enemies, go down on his knees, strip, and tear his innocent body with scourges for the salvation of the unhappy sinners.

The Saint Becomes Known

Algeria had just been conquered. Another throne was overset. And Victor Hugo was beginning to be talked about. But for all that, in one corner of France the Word of God had begun to matter. From 1830 onwards Ars was a changed place. "Ars is no longer Ars!" - so M. Vianney could announce from the pulpit. The parish in the fullest and oldest sense of the word - that word which Peguy loved so much, which he never wearied of repeating, which summed up for him the past of France - draws all its life from its curé. The humble ministry, discredited, contradicting in every way the ideas of the age, regained its authority. Society was being refashioned on the Christian model round this handful of houses. Men got into the habit of slipping into the church on their way to the fields, leaving their tools outside the door and their flocks waiting in the road. When the bell sounded for evening prayer, all the women gathered round the pulpit to make the responses to their pastor's prayer. No one would steal a root from a field. No one would cheat his neighbour of a sou, still less would anyone dare to "dummy" a filly or a cow to sell it at a better price.

A new delicacy came in, and with it a great politeness. Hired servants were treated like children, cared for body and soul. The law of Sunday rest and Sunday mass was observed with the most absolute rigour. On that day there reigned in the village an extraordinary silence, which was also a happy silence. Even clothes felt the change: modern fashions, imported from Villefranche-sur-Saône or Trevoux, gave way to the traditional costume of peasant women: neat, simple, unstudied, fitted to the condition of each. A villager is not a city dweller, the country is not the town. It took our age to commit the supreme folly of assimilating two things whose precise value, beauty and character, lie in their difference. But today it is taken for granted that the town stands for progress, the country for reaction.

The curé was at home everywhere. He always came at meal-time. He stood leaning against the wall, would accept a potato, sometimes even a half glass of wine, "just to taste it." He knew well that the domestic virtues draw strength from that hearth which he

had rekindled with his own hands.

There were certain chosen souls whom he visited somewhat more frequently, rather reproaching himself for his preference. There was, for instance, Mile, des Garets, always unshakable in her fidelity; her brother, the Vicomte, who often came down from Paris and who never wearied of generous giving; the worthy Claudine Lassagne, who passed from merely mechanical religion to deep devotion, and who brought up her daughter Catherine so well that she was later to take charge of one of the curé's parish works; little Benoite Lardet, who was to aid Catherine in her task; Mere Renard, who took the place of Mere Bibost as the curé's servant; the Comte de Cibeins, a man of some distinction, and very devout besides; M. Mandy, who did not shirk the responsibility of his office. And last, there was that extraordinary being, Père Chaffangeon, who remained for hours before the altar, without even moving his lips; it seems that he was speaking to God.

"And what do you say to Him?" the old curé asked.

"Oh!" replied the old peasant, "He looks at me and I look at Him."

The greatest of mystics have found no formula more simple, more exact, more complete, more sublime, to express the conversation of the soul with God.

Six years after his arrival, M. Vianney bought with his scanty pence a little house at the other end of the square, in order to found a girls' school. It took all that his father had left him. The house contained one classroom, and two bedrooms looking on a good-sized yard. He sent two good Christians, Catherine Lassagne and Benoite Lardet, to be trained for a few months by the Sisters of Saint Joseph at Foreins. To these two he added for the heavy work of the place Jeanne-Marie Chanay, a girl from Jassans, who had no very good reputation and who had done a good deal of dancing in the past. These three were the staff of the little convent.

They began with some fifteen pupils, but as the school was free, the number increased rapidly. The neighbouring villages sent boarders, and he turned the hayloft into a dormitory. Soon the house had to be enlarged, and like Saint Francis before him, M. Vianney became

a builder, not only in souls, but in stones.

Thus was born "La Providence." It justified its name very thoroughly. M. Vianney decided to reserve it for unfortunate girls with no family to support them, and he gathered them in from ten leagues around. He even picked them up, so we are told, off the roads. They might be eight years old, they might be twenty, no matter. Sometimes there were as many as sixty of them - and these he had to lodge, clothe, warm, feed, without any definite resources. The time came when gifts simply poured in, but needs were always ahead of means, so that the rule of the place right to the end was absolute trust in God, Who never lets His creatures perish.

It was indeed the most charming and the most peaceful spot in all that district. The rooms were low and airy. The square courtyard opened into a garden, which in turn stretched down to the fields. The three rows of windows are admirably proportioned; from one end to the other runs a light wooden balcony. There we may breathe an atmosphere child-like and supernatural, in which it is easy to understand why the saint made it his chosen place of refuge.

His "Providence" cost him many a weary journey. He had to beg, and he begged. But the peasant is not by nature free with money. M. Vianney had managed to cure him of blasphemy, immorality and drunkenness, but not of a fault which has a touch of virtue, splitting the difference between thrift and miserliness - the love of what one has, the clinging to property, because it has cost much labour, and because in an agricultural society a man must take precautions against lean years.

So he went to beg from the richer people in the châteaux, going as far as Lyons, where he was looked upon with respect by several generous women. . . . the work lived from hand to mouth, but at least we can say that it did live, and that never once did any orphan suffer for want of help. It was really a daily miracle, but to miracles of that sort most minds remain closed, although since the world began they have been worked unceasingly by God in favour of missions, schools, and works of mercy.

In this house which bore its name - which men marvelled to see existing on the devoted work of three worthy women, and on the

begging of one poor curé - it seems that Providence wished to prove by two startling interventions the miraculous character of the help it gave.

It was now that miracle, properly so-called, entered the life of M. Vianney.

It was in 1829. For some reason or other the granary where the community stored its corn was practically empty. There were no more than a few scanty handfuls of grain on the floor. And there seemed no prospect of adding to them, since the harvest was bad, and donors were weary of giving. M. Vianney had driven them too far, and even his naive simplicity did not dare to ask them again. So that some sixty children were about to go without bread, their principal food. In vain did M. Vianney drive his patron saints almost mad with his own prayers, with all the prayers he could get. They no longer replied, and the curé thought of sending his children away. Then it occurred to him to invoke Saint Francis Regis, for whom he had a special veneration. During his life this saint had miraculously provided food for the poor, and there was no reason why he should not do it after his death. M. Vianney went up to the loft, gathered the few grains into a heap, hid a relic of the saint under it, and set the community to prayer. After which, so his biographer tells us, he felt perfectly at peace. A few hours later he said to Jeanne-Marie Chanay, who was in charge of the kneading-trough and the oven, "Go and get together what remains of the corn."

Was it worth the trouble? At any rate, she did what she was told. She went to the presbytery, mounted the stairs - without enthusiasm certainly, probably with her mind on something else - and tried to open the door. The door resisted- it was almost as though some heavy mass was holding it shut from the inside. Jeanne-Marie tried again, and when she managed to get the door a little way open there came pouring out a flood of grain which went cascading down the stairs. She found it a little difficult to believe her eyes, the loft was full right to the roof. She flew down the stairs and told M. Vianney the good news. He was surprised, yet not so very much surprised - he was counting on it. He acted however as

though he had doubted, and said to his orphans, "I had distrusted God's goodness, my poor little ones. I wished to send you away. Truly He has punished me."

The corn, so say the eye-witnesses, had an unusual colour. Thus it is that faith fills barns with the harvests of heaven.

Four or five years later - we cannot fix the date with absolute precision, but the official registers mention a great drought in the year 1834 - there was neither corn in the granary at the presbytery, nor flour at La Providence: to be precise, there was just enough for three loaves. The miller at the end of his supplies had not made his delivery at the usual hour. M. Vianney gave the "baker" this order, "My daughter, put your yeast into the little bit of flour you have, close your kneading-trough, and tomorrow act as though everything were just as usual."

The next day, the "baker," when she touched the dough, felt it tremble and rise under her fingers. She "could not put water into it fast enough." Nevertheless, the more she put, the more the dough swelled, thickening as it swelled. The result was that the trough was in a moment "full to the brim, as on the days when the whole sack-full was put into it." She stopped; already the dough was spilling over on to the floor.

"They made ten huge loaves," notes Catherine Lassagne, "weighing 20 to 22 pounds each and they filled the oven as usual, to the great astonishment of all who saw it."

All that the Curé found to say was, "The good God is indeed good. He takes care of His poor."

The next day the miller delivered the flour.

There are two further miracles of the same order told of this convent - the first the miracle of the cask. A young girl, Marie Filliat, managed to extract from it just about enough wine to fill two little cups. She poured them into another cask. The cask was full.

The second was the marvel of the dish of gourds. On that day M. le Curé himself served his orphans. As the children were hungry, he very imprudently gave an enormous portion to each. And when everyone had been served, no one could quite see how there could still be gourds in the dish.

Truly it was a saintly house for a saintly pastor. In its poverty M. Vianney found himself at home. To it he transferred his catechism classes and his meals. He complained of being treated too well - and was not listened to. If he ate well, he would only pray the better: these good girls knew something about praying. He could say that it was not by him, but by them that so many favours from Heaven were obtained. To the poor all things are due. Where poverty reigns there is no obstacle between men and God's gifts.

M. Vianney dwelt on this thought insistently. One day God breathed in his ear a word to which there could be no reply, a word which reassured him once for all as to the future of the house: "What has been wanting to you up till now?"

"As a matter of fact," the curé added, "I have always had enough to go on with. I have observed that those who have an income are always complaining, there is always something that they lack. But those who have nothing, have nothing even to lack. . . . It is trust that God wants more than anything. When He alone is charged with all our concerns, it touches His justice and His goodness to aid us."

So it came about that he was no longer quite alone. He saw a spiritual posterity growing up about him. All his little orphans, broken to the life of prayer and work, of suffering and self-denial - he deprived them even of flowers, which, no doubt, is why God favoured them so overwhelmingly - would make good servants and later, perhaps, good mothers. Above all dear to his heart, were the elder girls who did the work of training - the delicate Benoite Lardet, who was later to die of overwork, Catherine Lassagne, who to the very end put up with the ill humours of Jeanne-Marie Chanay, Jeanne-Marie herself, whose temper improved to everyone but Catherine, and lastly, Marie Filliat, who took the place of Benoite Lardet.

Yet we must never forget that his most intimate friends were not of this world. His life, his words, his ever-growing sanctity and the extraordinary powers which flowed from it must remain altogether beyond understanding, if we refuse to follow him on to the plane - the supernatural plane- - where these things belong. M. Vianney lived in the presence of the saints - first in thought, then in reality. We have already seen with wonder what Saint Francis Regis had deigned to do for him through a tiny relic. That was only the first sign. Later we shall see many apparitions affirmed by eye-witnesses, from which we may justly suppose many others besides. His special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, to Saint Michael and the Holy Angels, to his patron, Saint John the Baptist, finally to Saint Philomena - all of them have their chapel in his church, and in each, so it would seem, he was favoured with visions - give us a clue to the line anyone must follow who would lay bare the secret of his continued intercourse with Heaven. For us the task would be too great.

Yet, if we are to speak of him at all, we must speak of Saint Philomena, the child martyr whose bones were found fifteen centuries after her death in one of the catacombs at Rome; since to speak of him is to speak of her, so closely, so inseparably is she bound to his work of intercession, conversion, and miracle-working.

The story of Philomena is one of the few stories worth telling, if you look at the world's history as a thing ruled by Providence. Kings meet, make treaties; Cleopatra's nose settles the fate of an empire; a barbarian chief ravages Europe; a philosopher erects a system which for five hundred years lies heavy on a country's destiny; someone discovers electricity, someone else gunpowder, railroads, the printing press. One might talk for ever on all that flowed from each of these; but a hundred times more marvellous, and a hundred times more important is a little unknown maid meeting across the ages a good village curé with sanctity in him.

At the end of the first century, or at any rate, not later than the first half of the second century, a child of from thirteen to fifteen died in Rome. She was buried in the underground cemetery of Priscilla. By her side was placed a phial of her blood. Before her tomb were set

three tablets of baked clay, on which were traced in red-lead the words:

PAX TECUM FILUMENA!

There were also painted three arrows, two anchors and an olive branch. The olive branch stood for the peace of the kingdom of God. The anchors meant that the dead child had found her way into the kingdom. The phial of blood was the symbol of martyrdom. The three arrows picture those which pierced the child. It is possible even that her name was not the name we find on the inscription. For Philomena means "dearly loved." So that it may merely express the feeling of her relations or of the friends who made ready her tomb.

There is no limit to the theories that may be woven about these relics. But, in hard fact, there we have all that is known of her. For seventeen hundred years, she slept unknown of men. She prayed for them in heaven, but they did not pray to her. Then several miles of underground tombs were swept clear - but not hers. Inviolate, inviolable: her earthly destiny might well have seemed to be over. God was keeping her in reserve. Yet seventeen hundred years, and the world blindly groping had need of her. Then God gave her the command to show herself to men.

In the year 1802, new explorations beneath the soil of Rome had resulted in the discovery of several martyrs' burying places. Three years later a young priest of the diocese of Rome, Dom Francois de Lucia, accompanying his bishop to the Holy City, expressed a very strong desire to take back the body of a saint to his parish, which was proving difficult to convert. They offered him a choice among some nameless remains. But what is the use of a saint who has no name to which one may attach one's prayers? By very great favour they brought him three bodies, of which the names were known for certain, and which had not yet been allotted. The name of Philomena seized his fancy. Yet he had to seek the intervention of his bishop in order to obtain the precious bones.

At Naples the Bishop of Potenza broke the seals, made an official examination of the relics and enclosed them in a statuette which

bore in one hand an arrow, in the other a palm and a lily. The pious lady who had to dress the statuette had hardly touched it when she felt a tremor through her body and was instantly cured of a disease, said to be incurable, which she had had for ten years past. The evening before the departure of the relic, in the room where it was kept, the saint cured a lawyer of sciatica and a noble lady of an ulcer on the hand. At Mugnano miracles multiplied, attracting religious, bishops, princes - and many French priests.

The result of it all was that the Pope decided to canonise this girl, of whom nothing was known save her death for the Faith and her long-delayed miracles. It is worth stressing this case of an unknown raised to the altars, a case unparalleled in all the Church's history.

M. Vianney had on one occasion been taken to Lyons by his master, the Abbé Bailey, to visit a certain Pauline Jaricot, the foundress of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith; and it was her miraculous curé which a few years later caused the Holy Father to decide on this unprecedented canonisation. She had spoken to M. Vianney of the martyr whose praises were being sung from town to town and from door to door by the Brothers of Saint John of God, who had recently been driven from Italy. Later on she sent him a parcel of her ashes; this was how the Curé d'Ars came to meet Saint Philomena.

Exactly when he began to pray to her, remains his secret. The sudden importance that he attributed to her veneration - so great that he built a chapel in her honour- are not comprehensible save as the result of a long-felt attraction, prayers granted, exceptional favours obtained. From the time he began to speak openly of her, he spoke as of a friend. All the miracles he worked, he attributed to her.

You may object that there is no lack of canonised saints. M. Vianney knew of hundreds of them, and never wearied in holding up their example in public and private. Why, then, this particular choice? Without pretending to read the designs of God, we may in all reverence seek for human reasons. And the chief of these, as it seems to us, is that the little martyr was a more perfect example than any other of his ideal of obscurity.

For after all nothing is known of her - nothing of her life on earth, save only her manner of leaving it. At a time when the glory that she received in Heaven might most naturally have found some echo here on earth, God hid her from the praise of men: for men she was as though she had not been. And this for seventeen hundred years. Then by a hundred miracles God proved how great in His sight are these dead ashes, the very sign and symbol of lowliness. "It is our duty to become saints," said the Curé of Ars to himself. "But let nobody know it. Saint Philomena points the way."

Another reason very close to the curé's heart lies in the blind act of faith that devotion to Saint Philomena demands. We have, so to speak, no human and historic certitude that she ever existed. So that the Holy See had to make an exception in her favour. We have her miracles and the Pope's word: no more, no less. M. Vianney did not need so much.

And then she was a girl.

It has not been sufficiently noted that He Who created Adam for Eve and Eve for Adam has delighted to honour the idea of marriage, to lift it above itself, to set it free from the flesh, in the person of the men and women saints whom He has linked together spiritually on earth. We may say the same of the idea of fatherhood, and again of the idea of brotherhood- every bond of natural love transmuted into mystical relationship. Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Clare, Saint Theresa and Saint John of the Cross, Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jeanne de Chantal, Saint Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica, his sister.

The Curé d'Ars never knew close friendship, even in the spiritual order, with any woman. Yet his heart was tender enough. From the first day of his priesthood his family was, so to speak, erased from his life. His girls at La Providence all held an equal place in his affections. But in secret, God had chosen for him a companion no longer of this world, a little maid of the olden time, who was to be at once his lady, betrothed, sister - and even later his daughter, for whereas he grew old, she remained fixed in the spring of her youth. Soon, speaking to her as a father, he might more easily press her with his entreaties: he need no longer be on his guard with her: he might even scold her, though gently.

When God sent her to him - this indeed being the strongest reason of all - she came just at the right moment to turn away from him the praise of men, to spare what was rapidly becoming a torture to his modesty and a temptation to his pride. The unhappy man had begun to work miracles - a cause of great satisfaction, but also, for a saint, of great humiliation.

For himself the priest knows perfectly well that God chooses him as a pure nothing, the more strikingly to manifest His own omnipotence, and that He would have taken one less worthy, if any such had been at hand. His only merit is that he does not say "no," and that he allows the wave of divine power to flow through him. But, looked at from outside a miracle is a miracle: it is in vain that a man makes excuses, nobody will believe that he counts for nothing in the matter. Do what he may, he cannot escape the admiration of the crowd, nor even, for no man is perfect, a certain satisfaction with himself. As for the curé, just as he had taken cover behind Saint Francis Regis for the filling of his granary, he now took cover behind his patron Saint John the Baptist, who had an altar in the church, where he was venerated most particularly, behind Saint Michael, behind the angels as a body. But after all, these had not worked miracles for many a year, and the faithful asked one another: "What has taken them all at once?"

They accused the curé of trying to bluff them.

And now, exactly at the right moment - but exactly - came a little saint from Italy who was in full here-and-now enjoyment of an enormous reputation. The favour which surrounded her was all the greater because she was new. Saints get used up very quickly in the eyes of the world, which is why God Who knows all about it - since it is He Who is acting through them - unceasingly reveals new ones. So it was Philomena that he petitioned to obtain from God, not perhaps the most precious miracles, but at least the most externally visible, and therefore the most compromising.

It would be possible to write a charming dialogue, a dialogue which might very well be true, on the preliminary negotiations between the little saint and the curé. "Every time that somebody with a bodily ailment begs to be cured, it is understood that I send him to you. And if it be the will of God, you will cure him." The bargain

was struck. For thirty years the "Princess of Heaven" and the servant on earth were to keep up this familiar intercourse. They conversed together, perhaps even she appeared to him. Visible or not, she was never far away from him, and when he suffered, she told him her sufferings. He called her his "dear little saint," his "counsel," his "prête-nom," his "chargée d'affaires with God." So hand in hand they will go down the centuries, and the world awaits a Giotto to depict their betrothal.

So now when crowds came thronging into the tiny church in the forgotten hamlet, M. Vianney could remain calm - they had not come to see the curé, but his little saint, lying in her crystal shell.

The Rumour of Faith

M. Vianney was, of course, deceiving himself. A living saint is more sought after than a dead saint. He it was that they came to see. It was for him that crowds pressed into his village. We remember his prediction: "This parish will not be able to hold all those who later will come to it." In saying that, he said only what the Holy Spirit made him say, and the Holy Spirit does not lie. It was no surprise to him when the prophecy came to pass.

The gradual transformation of the parish produced a profound effect outside it. Many a curé and many a vicaire had to ask himself what had happened to M. Vianney. Those whose pity he had aroused by his apparent ignorance came to a juster sense of his worth, yet without forming any clear impression. They no longer hesitated to ask his services as substitute or assistant. As he never refused, they fell into the way of asking him as a matter of course. He would start early on foot. At night he would return to his parish, bent double, frozen, to assure himself that all was well. Already the strange fever which was to rage in his meagre body to the very end of his life had set up its domicile there. But he made no complaint.

It was a time when the Carthusians at Lyons sent out priests into parishes too small to be entitled to a resident curé. In this matter Ars was privileged, but when it was seen that the resident curé was M. Vianney, nobody thought that the privilege amounted to much. Soon he was preaching and hearing confessions at Chanceux, Montmerle, Limas, and even Trevoux. These ceaseless expeditions resulted in increasing the radius of his influence, and by now his name had long been known for thirty miles around. For or against, there was no one who had not heard of him. Yet there was a good deal of mistrust. People had not yet reached the point of going to Ars to see him; but when he was among them they took care not to miss him.

From the very first sermon men had to admit that his parishioners did not exaggerate his merits. His eloquence, which was not so much eloquence as that better thing which despises eloquence, appeared to all something entirely new. He repeated a score of

times the very same things which on the lips of his fellow priests had long grown stale without obtaining any particular result - which, indeed, their congregations had fallen into the habit of hearing without listening. But apparently he thought them and felt them with more intensity: with them he found a way to stir hearts in their very depths.

But what no one could have suspected, what absolutely stupefied laymen - and even more priests - was the revelation of his genius as a confessor. Could he already read souls? Did men, alone with him, fall under the dominion of his faith and his burning charity? However this may be, it is certain that at the mission he gave at Trevoux in 1823, the chapel where he heard confessions was not empty for a moment. People came to him from curiosity, and returned to him from necessity: through him men learned the infinite value of the Sacrament of Penance. The poor came to him, well-known citizens, even priests. Sometimes, so we are told, his host had to keep dinner waiting for him till midnight. And he scarcely touched it then.

"I have a good workman," one of his confreres said. "He works hard and eats nothing."

Naturally his fame spread rapidly throughout the diocese. In the parish of Limas where he had come to preach the Forty Hours, he found the choir filled with ecclesiastics who had made special arrangements to come and hear him.

"It frightened me at the beginning," he explained. "However, I began to preach on the love of God, and it seems that it went well. Everybody was in tears."

Even the great pulpit orators have not often managed that - to bring tears to the eyes of an audience of priests. Men took seriously the conversions he brought about, the virtues that were attributed to him (in which many found cause for shame), and even his first miracle, which gave cold shivers to the prudent. And a day dawned when M. Vianney no longer had to go to the mountain: the mountain came to him.

Four years after the great mission at Trevoux, one might have

counted every day a score of pilgrims going to Ars for the good of their souls; a certain number settled there, but the stream always swelled. In less than two years it had assumed such proportions that the poor curé no longer had a moment's leisure. The chain that bound him to his confessional was never more broken till his death, after thirty years' ministry. We cannot picture to ourselves without fear and exultation the heroism that God was about to demand of his chosen instrument.

M. Vianney went to bed at nine, or sometimes ten. No one could be sure that he slept. At midnight he rose, and taking his lantern went downstairs. There were people round about the church, in the cemetery, in the porch which he had had built near the steeple. He made his way into the church, went down on his knees and asked God to bless the day that was beginning. He lit one or two tapers, himself sounded the Angelus, opened the door for pilgrims, and took his place in the confessional in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist. A soul lay open before him.

All that seems to us simple enough, but for him each time it was a drama, a test, a cross.

That secret place where even angels do not enter - the place not only of actions but of thoughts and the obscure medley of motives - opened its door so that he, a stranger, became a confidant. This stranger, this confidant, was no longer a man like other men, a man curious, amused, possibly indiscreet: he was the representative of God on earth; for the ear that listens and transmits only to God what it hears is truly the ear of God. The mouth that replies, guides, consoles, binds and looses is truly the mouth of God. The Curé d'Ars was that ear and that mouth. And he knew it.

He knew it as all priests know it, but more clearly. Confessions, rapid and numerous as they were, were never to him mere pieces of routine. He never allowed the consciousness of his task as a priest to be out of his mind for an instant. Every time, he listened as God, he replied as God - with much trembling, for he was only a humble servant, but in the possession of all the resources that God can give and in the certainty that Christ lived in him.

The soul which came to lay itself bare before him did not always come very willingly. If it were afraid he gave it confidence. If it made pretences, he stripped it bare. If it gave only half its secret, he opened it wide; in himself he was a living argument that no one could resist. That men might show themselves just as they were, he showed himself just as he was, in all his boundless love for God; to the soul that lay open before him, he opened his own soul, and showed the love of God that was in it. If it was empty, he filled it. If it had begun to thirst for God, he quickened its thirst. And if it felt no thirst, he showed it the stream of God's Grace welling in his own soul.

But what a spectacle he had before him of barrenness, of obstinacy, of indifference. The moment when the door opened, and the curtain was about to be raised, was for him always a new moment of anguish - for it always meant a new revelation of the wretchedness of the creature who will not love God enough.

Such a one was only ignorant, he would instruct him: darkened in conscience, he would enlighten him: lukewarm, he would inflame him: indolent, he would stir him to new life: slothful, he would awaken him: inconstant, he would fix his mind: cowardly or feeble, he would revitalise him: he would break through the crust that so often overgrows souls, bring consolation where there was misery, bring reminder of sin where there was happiness without reason. And where a soul had lost touch with God, he knew how to remake contact.

Who would not be almost overcome with giddiness, standing on the edge of those abysses that life digs in the souls of men? But as has been said, he "clung tight to the hand of his Mother, the Church"; he leaned for support on the rock of her teaching: he depended on the breath of the Spirit Who inspired Her, and Who could at every moment inspire him. And the more he realised how immeasurable was his own weakness, the stronger he felt, for he knew then that it was all in the hands of God.

Strength and suffering went together. The power that he borrowed from God was linked up intimately with suffering in his own person. Christ on the Cross took upon himself all the sins of mankind. It was for his servant to take that share of suffering which

belonged to the sins of those who confessed to him - his share of the spitting, the blows, the insults, the wounds. All through the day, and often into the night, enclosed in his wooden prison, he bore men's burdens, and he pardoned their sins. Yet his mind remained clear, for he knew also how to direct.

To absolve a soul is not everything. The priest must also be able to give advice, sometimes heroic, sometimes more prudently weighed, which will enable the soul not only to avoid the sins to which it is more particularly tempted, but to swim against the stream as high as its own nature, aided by the Grace of God, is capable of going: and each soul, if it is to attain to the best that is in it, must have individual treatment.

Every soul is a special case. Just as in the whole of creation there are no two blades of grass alike, even so - and with more reason - there are no two souls alike - since the simplest of them is created by a new and always different act of the infinite and infinitely diverse will of God. Then each is flung into the world and instantly swept up into a network of incidents and influences which go to increase the diversity that is there by nature. All this, unfortunately, is a field of which professed psychologists cannot realise either the mysteries or the riches.

The deepest and most subtle of them - Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Rivarol or Stendhal - even Proust or Gide - are mere children compared with the confessor who takes his work seriously knowing that his own salvation and other men's will depend on the way he does it. They ply their art on paper - and paper will put up with anything. And after all, the consequences do not concern them.

Further, the more important part of their science escapes them, the part which discerns in the soul what truly belongs to it and what does not, what movements are from within, what movements are from without, and among these last which come from the devil and which come from God. Nor can they know with what capacity for faith and love a particular soul has been endowed, nor what precise means of sanctification is foreseen for it in the divine plan. While they ignore, and make a point of ignoring, the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and the whole activity of the supernatural life, they will only skim the surface of man - one half of man's secret will

always escape them.

By infused grace the Curé d'Ars possessed to the very highest degree that human and divine science which can balance in one account the nature common to all men, the loss inflicted on all men alike by original sin, the individuality of each nature, the evil influences brought to bear upon it, the heavenly protections there for its defence, and all that grace can do to nourish the life of God in the very depths of the soul.

For the glory of God and for the happiness of men he had but one aim - to make saints. The bad had to be made good; the good had to be made heroically good: all alike had to be made sure of a place - high or low, in the centre or on the fringe - in the court of heaven. It was a whole world - and a world marvellously various, a jostle of contradictory elements - that came pressing round the little box that had become M. Vianney's headquarters: peasants, townsmen, nobles, intellectuals, priests, monks. And he understood them all.

"In spiritual direction," writes the Abbé Monnin, "the chief thing is to follow God's call and make others follow it, to keep pace with the Holy Spirit, to proportion oneself to souls in order to make them conform to Jesus Christ."

M. Vianney was the very essence of sound good sense, and he never left his good sense outside the confessional. But at moments he soared from the earth, flung human prudence to the winds, called upon a human soul to be superhuman, gave it the aid it needed, a touch here, a check there - barely perceptible to the soul of the penitent: the true balance was found and the soul stood upright in supernatural certitude, made the first firm step in the way of perfection. M. Vianney had given the right impulse - unerringly: the soul had but to continue.

It may seem strange that a simple parish priest - a very simple parish priest, later to show himself so troubled and uncertain as to his own vocation - should have been able so instantly and decisively to diagnose the needs of his penitents. In all this there was something more than could be explained by shrewd good sense, or by what is commonly called intuition, or even by the special grace God gives to the minister of a sacrament.

It is certain that M. Vianney could quite literally read hearts.

The Abbé Monnin - who knew better than any other the curé's sanctity, being himself perhaps a little touched with that same quality - has an illuminating theory to explain this extraordinary power.

According to him, union with God enables man to see clear through the veil of the flesh to the deepest mysteries of the soul. In the ordinary way, the soul emerges from its sanctuary to make contact with material objects - and it never gets below their surface. In the mystical state, on the other hand, it withdraws into itself, and there, no longer deafened by the clamours of the world, "turned towards those regions whence truth comes," it gains a truer and clearer view, even of the things of this world. The veil grows translucent, shone through by the spirit. Man in some fashion has a foretaste of the purification of death, and his soul, free of its subjection to the flesh, tends to be like the angels. It sees as they see, without the aid of the senses. It has as they have a direct vision of all things that actually are in this world: even, if God permits, it may, seeing God, see in Him things to come and the secrets of other men's souls. So that, in the measure of God's will, it shares something of the knowledge of the angels and of the all-knowledge of God.

Thus the saint knows more of this world to which he closes his mind than the philosopher who opens his mind to no other.

Even before he was actually spoken to, the curé knew what kind of soul he was dealing with. From the moment men came into his presence it was impossible to keep anything hidden. It was as though he had taken his stand in the very conscience of his penitents with clearer vision and better memory than themselves: almost he seemed to see and remember for them. If you tried to hide in the crowd, he came straight through the crowd. If with very little time to spare one were afraid of missing him, he seemed to hear the appeal which the penitent dared not utter aloud and would invite him to come ahead of his turn. It was exactly as though he held in his hand a thousand unseen threads linking him with everyone present, so that he had on]y to pull on the one he wanted, when he wanted. It was enough for him to raise his arm; the person

he had in mind felt himself pointed at and obeyed the sign.

It may be worth while to illustrate this gift by a few examples.

On one occasion there was a great throng of pilgrims. Three ladies - grandmother, mother, daughter - who had waited patiently for several days, at last gave up hope of a private audience. In any case, it seemed that there was no great matter on their conscience: neither the mother nor the grandmother had any suspicion of the mortal sin torturing the girl, nor of her desperate need for instant help. Just in time to stop them going away, without any apparent reason, the curé broke off hearing confessions and came out of the box. He went straight to the three ladies, looked at the sinner, and ordered her to follow him immediately.

Again, there was the case of a bandit, a highway robber, who had fallen ill, and without any repentance for his sins had come to Ars to be cured. The curé refused to listen to him. The robber came back, insisted, was even prepared to go to confession if that was what was wanted, provided, of course, that he might choose what he would confess. M. Vianney heard his confession, and at the end asked him: "Is that all?"

"Yes, Father."

"Yet you haven't told me that on such a day at such a place you did this - on such another day at such another place you did that?" - and so on down the list of his crimes.

The robber went away converted - and incidentally cured.

A young man made a bet that he would deceive the curé. He came before him striking his breast and groaning.

"It is a terrible sinner who comes to you," he sighed.

"As you say, my friend, but I haven't the time to waste. Go and confess to somebody else."

And M. Vianney turned away. This surprising reception set the

jester thinking. He examined his conscience, felt ashamed, returned to the curé with true contrition. And the curé knew it, and received him with open arms.

Again: an old man, a freethinker, joined up with a group of pilgrims and was sufficiently inquisitive to enter the church. He did not suspect what was awaiting him. M. Vianney seized him as he entered and led him to the sacristy. There the curé grasped him warmly by the hand and asked him point blank: "How long since your last confession?"

"Thirty years," said the old man cheerfully.

"Thirty-three, my friend. It was on such an occasion, in such a church."

"Good God!" said the old man.

"And now I shall hear your confession, eh?"

They were at it for twenty minutes. The ancient sinner poured out all the sins that were on his conscience and promised to keep it clear for the future.

One more case of the same sort: Père Rochette. He had brought his wife and his little boy, who was ill. The curé called him: no reply. Once - twice - the third time. Not to appear rude, the peasant followed him behind the altar: "After all," he said to himself, "he won't eat me."

The curé pointed to the confessional: "Here we are. Get inside."

"But I don't want to," replied the worthy man.

"That doesn't matter, just begin."

As it happened, it was the curé who began - by reminding the old man of certain sins that he had forgotten. That was enough. Père Rochette found it quite easy to continue.

Here we may set down the more difficult case of a woman penitent who analysed her own experiences. We are at liberty tp quote a part of the story she told Abbé Monnin.

"Troubled by a strong anxiety concerning my vocation, I was hesitant to impart it to him, finding it difficult to explain myself clearly, and fearing that he might - through not understanding my case - give a decision which might be a grave trouble to me for the rest of my life. The confidence I had in him was greater than in any other man. I felt that nothing that could be said to me would avail to efface the impression of any advice he might give. As, therefore, the matter was of such a sort that silence could not interfere with the validity of my confession, I made up my mind, though with very great difficulty, not to speak of it. I cannot hope to convey my feelings, my complete amazement, when he replied to the question I had decided not to ask, with a precision that I would not have dared to hope, even if I had laid the matter before him with the most minute care."

He could see things happening in other places - he could see far into the future: instances of this latter gift, thoroughly proved, are almost countless. Even he could see into the next life. A lady whose husband had drowned himself was so overwhelmed by the idea of his certain damnation, that she had made her way to Ars to glean from the curé even the tiniest hope. Before she had time to put her question, he said, "Do not worry. Between the bridge and the water your husband repented, and made an act of contrition. Pray for him."

As we turn over the pages of his life we never find any lack of dramatic instances. Perhaps the reader will bear one more story. A society woman, leading a sinful life, who had come to Ars merely out of curiosity, was accosted by the curé as she walked across the square.

"Follow me," he said.

As soon as they were alone, without asking a single question, he showed her her life, as in a mirror - weakness, sins committed, sins

repeated, gradual hardening in sin. Then he stopped. The young woman, utterly overwhelmed, begged him of her own accord to hear her confession, the natural conclusion, as one would expect, of his intervention.

"It would be of no use," he replied. "I see two demons in your soul - the demon of pride and the demon of impurity. While you remain where you are, they will hold you bound and I cannot give you absolution. I know the state of your mind. You will sink lower still."

He completed the picture of her life by frightful details concerning her approaching fall. She uttered a cry of horror: "Then I am damned?"

"I did not say that. But your salvation will be difficult."

"What must I do?"

"Come back tomorrow and I shall tell you."

He must have prayed and suffered for her - that is known to himself alone. All we know is that he foretold that after fresh and fierce temptations she would leave Paris against her will, that she would go for refuge to a house he mentioned - a house which she did in fact own on the Mediterranean coast - and that there the grace to repent would be given her.

All that he prophesied came to pass. He had not only seen the future, but he had even changed it - or, more exactly, he had obtained from God the unlikely and undeserved help which was to come at the end of the sins of this unhappy creature.

We know that he could be hard, and he often was. If he could not persuade a sinner to renounce his sins, he refused absolution. He never concealed the gravity of sin. Simply, "My friend, you are damned," he said. But he added, "How frightful." And then he would burst into tears. Time and again a sinner seeing him so distressed at the prospect of his soul being lost, ceased to regard that loss with a mere shrug of the shoulders, felt less certain in his reliance for salvation on the mere kindness of God. God, unfortunately, pardons

nothing to those who pardon themselves everything. Then a man would feel that he must make an effort, do something for himself. And for the most part M. Vianney demanded some fairly heavy penance.

We are told of Mother Marie Veronique, who was later to found the Order of Victims of the Sacred Heart, that, as a trial of her vocation, he ordered her to kneel with arms outstretched in form of a cross before the church door. There was a young man of twenty-six who wished to turn from his sins, yet wanted to keep his conversion to himself: he was ordered to walk in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament in his own town, and not only to walk, but to walk in the front rank. As soon as a pilgrim who had been proud of his atheism was converted, he would send him, rosary in hand, to say his penance publicly before the altar. From these acts of humiliation he could draw the most powerful and lasting good effects for souls.

The priest to whom has fallen the great honour of ruling the curé's parish tells us, apropos of this, with perfect justice, that to arrive at faith the shortest and surest road is the road of good works. In support he quotes the phrase of Saint John: "He who does the truth comes to the light."

There you have the key of M. Vianney's spiritual policy. He forced shamefaced converts to advertise their case, shy converts to come forward, timorous converts to act openly. For the same reason it often happened that he extracted confessions from people of no apparent faith. We have already quoted more than one example, but there is one reported by Monsignor Convert, which gives a most apt illustration of his daring.

One day the Curé d'Ars saw a man of high social rank enter his sacristy. The unknown approached respectfully, and the curé - mistaken for once, or perhaps pretending to be - thought he guessed his purpose. He pointed to the stool where penitents usually knelt.

"M. le Curé," the man hastened to say politely, "I have not come to make my confession, but to discuss things with you."

"Oh, my friend, you have come to the wrong place; I have no skill at discussion. But if it is consolation that you want, kneel there and

believe that many another has knelt there before you and has not regretted it."

"But, M. le Curé, I have already had the honour of informing you that I had not come to make my confession, and that for a very good reason: I have not the faith. I do not believe in confession any more than in the rest of your doctrine."

"You have not the faith? How I pity you. You live in a fog, a small child with his catechism knows more than you. I thought I was ignorant, but you are worse. You have not the faith? Very well, kneel there. I shall hear your confession, and afterwards you will have the faith, just as I have."

"But, M. le Curé, you are asking me to act an utter farce."

"Kneel there."

The persuasiveness, the sweetness, the tone of authority tempered by grace with which these words were spoken, brought the man to his knees, almost without his knowing it, certainly with much reluctance. He made the sign of the cross for the first time in years and began his confession. He arose, not only comforted, but a firm believer.

The curé, merely hearing him speak, had diagnosed the sheer emptiness of his soul. Though there was no explicit faith there, he had discovered that there was good soil wherein he might plant the seed of faith, or where the seed already lying dormant might grow.

We know that he never acted simply of himself. But at times the co-operation he demanded from his chosen saints was demanded publicly. If a pilgrim rejected his suggestions, he would advise him to go and meditate in the chapel of Our Lady, or Saint Philomena, or the Holy Angels: and a half-hour's silence in the presence of the saints did what words could not do.

Thus you might see M. Maissiat, a geologist and freethinker, who had been in turn Jew, Mahommedan, Socialist, Communist, tete a tete with the little virgin martyr, with tears in his eyes which he would have found it difficult to account for. When he left the

chapel, he was still far from believing, but at least he had gained the will to believe: the curé could return to the work.

In one case he would attack point blank, in another he would use circumspection - it all depended. In knowledge of method no one ever surpassed him.

On one occasion he saw, planted in the crowd between the presbytery and the church, a hunter of wild duck with his dog and gun. The curé stopped and remarked:

"It is a pity that your soul is not as beautiful as your dog."

Thunderstruck, the hunter fell on his knees, handed over his animal to the first comer, and followed the curé into the church. There he received the incredible advice to join a Trappist monastery, and, still more incredible, he took it seriously. Nor was it a joke: he entered a year later.

He could act in the opposite direction. A young man thought he had a vocation: the curé suggested marriage. A self-styled mystic was ordered to stop praying. Just as he came to a knowledge of souls by the most diverse routes, so by the most diverse routes he led them to salvation. Yet all this delicate and difficult work was done at full speed, with no hesitations. He never slowed down unless it was absolutely necessary. He wasted no time giving reasons. Simply he diagnosed the case, prescribed the remedy, and gently dismissed the penitent.

That was his mission. That was his way of carrying it out: all very fruitless, you say - a stumbling-block to unbelievers. But there was a still greater stumbling-block - his want of concern with bodily suffering.

His work was not the healing of bodies. When bread was needed for the orphans at La Providence, we have seen how he multiplied flour and corn for them. In actual fact he did, again and yet again, cure the incurable, heal the sick, give strength to impotence. There are countless miracles in the material order to be attributed to his intercession and that of Saint Philomena. But it would be a

complete misunderstanding of his character to attribute to these more importance than they held in his mind: in his particular mission - which was a spiritual mission, directed to men's souls - they were by the way, a luxury so to say, not of the essence.

In this he was in the strict line of the gospels, which show Our Lord relieving the body only in order to win souls and to convince men of His omnipotence. "Go thy way," said the Master, "thy faith hath made thee whole."

It is faith that matters - whether as the cause of the cure or the result - not the cure itself. But men are so constituted that they are more moved by a blind man restored to sight than by a soul surrendering to God's grace; it is a weakness in them - and as such, has to be taken into account; but the less the better, thought the Curé d'Ars.

Yet he had a whole treasury of compassion in him, and this compassion gave him a power of which he was not always in a position to stifle or even postpone the workings.

A poor woman passed on crutches. She looked at him imploringly. What else could he say but "Try to walk!" For he was not void of pity!

"Walk, woman, as you are told," added his curate, M. Toccanier.

She walked. The pilgrims were wild with enthusiasm.

"Take your crutches and be off," cried M. Vianney; and he too was "off."

"A nice thing happened to me today," he related once. "I was horribly ashamed. If I could have found a rat hole, I should have hidden in it. . . . There's no getting away from it, God still works miracles. A woman brought me a child with a great tumour near one eye. She made me touch it, and it cleared away."

"This time," someone replied, "you won't say it was Saint Philomena!"

"Ah! she probably had something to do with it."

In the chapel of his little saint, consumptives, the blind, the dumb, the paralytic were cured. Before sending them there, he catechised them, made certain of their faith, showed them the obstacles that their own imperfection put in the way of grace. There was no "if" or "but" about it. When he said, "It is impossible," or "You are unworthy of it," there was no cure.

He particularly disliked instantaneous cures.

"They cause too much talk," he explained lo his curate. "I have prayed to Saint Philomena to cure souls in our church as often as she pleases - but, as for bodies, to cure them somewhere else. She has listened to me all right this time; several sick people have come here to begin their novena, have finished it somewhere else, and their prayer has been heard, no one seeing or knowing anything about it."

But he was neatly caught when she stopped making cures. One day he scolded her during Mass: "Great saint, if you do not work miracles, you will lose your reputation."

At that very moment, unsuspected by him, a pilgrim hearing Mass felt his disease pass from him.

But usually M. Vianney thought it useful - much more useful - to leave men their diseases.

"This poor body, which must die, is not worth a great deal" - and there was the under-current - "Leave him his cross."

That, after all, is the point you always get back to with the saints. Not one of them - not the most smiling, gentle, compassionate saint of them all - has ever preached anything other. The central point of their Master's preaching is that voluntary act by which He nailed Himself to the cross.

Whatever may be thought by our humanitarian age, which cares only for the well-being of the body, the diminution of men's suffering - on this earth, which is only a point in space, in this life, which is only an instant in time - is of no importance beside the saving of their souls - and, incidentally, their bodies - from an

eternity of torment: an eternity deprived of that face-to-face vision of God which is the only happiness worth our striving.

A child lay bedridden - one open sore from head to foot - with no moment of rest - no hope on this earth.

"You are in great suffering, my poor child?" asked the curé, bending over him.

"No," he answered; "today I do not feel yesterday's pain, tomorrow I shall not feel today's."

"You would very much like to be cured?"

"No; I was sinful before I fell ill; I might fall back into that. I am safer as I am."

And M. Vianney added:

"Children so indwelt by the Holy Spirit put us to shame. . . ."

"The cross is a ladder to heaven . . . ." he said another time. "He who does not love the cross, may possibly be saved, but with great difficulty; he will be but a small star in the firmament. He who has suffered and fought for God will shine like a sun in beauty."

In truth, his dream was of a humanity crucified, filling and overflowing heaven.

Cruelty? Charity! Superhuman charity - the first charity we owe our fellow-men, since man's destiny is superhuman. "Let us love the cross," he never wearied of that. "It is God's gift to his friends."

The crowd that throngs the little church - no more than a narrow passage running up to a humble pulpit - wherein a priest humbler than other priests walks like a farm labourer: this crowd, now, does it know what it has come for, what it wants of this man, when the great breath of grace sweeps it towards him, sets it down at his feet?

The cross and the love of the cross. Miracles of healing are no more than a trick to bring in feeble souls; that they may go out again

strong - resolved to bear suffering well.

And if they bear suffering ill, M. Vianney offers himself in their stead.

The Price of Success

So success became triumph. Pilgrims brought pilgrims, the curious brought the curious, converts brought unbelievers: from every province of France, from beyond France's borders, from overseas. It was the poor who began it; the middle-class swallowed its prejudices and followed; soon even the intellectual world was drawn. There were savants, artists, theologians, high ecclesiastics. Lacordaire, come from his pulpit at Notre Dame, preached from the lowly pulpit at Ars, and knew that it was he that was honoured. A service of coaches was organised; special trains were run; and - of course - hotels: the pilgrims must sleep. So great grew the crowds that they overflowed the hotels; the houses of the townsmen became lodging-houses. Often enough it took a week to secure an audience. M. Vianney's church was an admirable place to learn patience.

From being an item of local news all this soon became of national importance. The new world, spawn of the atheist thought of the eighteenth century, its ears closed to the passionate appeals of the handful of Christian thinkers and orators, woke one fine morning to the rumour of an incredible thing:

"Yes, my worthy friends, France has a saint." They had thought that France was done with saints - excepting, of course, the occasional fanatic who is always allured, in times of revolution, by the false glamour of martyrdom. What we have seen happen to Saint Therese of Lisieux after her death happened to the Curé d'Ars in his lifetime; he was known for a saint.

"Who wants to see a saint of flesh and blood?" All France was asking that.

Who does not? Even those who either dare not face the ordeal of his confessional, or feel no call to it, can see for themselves from outside that a saint - this saint anyhow - is a very busy man.

Listen!

On the stroke of one - in the morning - he said his prayers in the church. Then till six o'clock he heard the confessions of women. At six he said his Mass; then he made his thanksgiving. After that he was at the service of the faithful - to bless images, for instance, or give advice. About eight he allowed himself time off to go across the square to the convent of La Providence and drink half a glass of milk - without bread. And as the nuns, too, had need of advice, he gave it - on the move. At half-past eight he was back in the sacristy, hearing the confessions of the men. At ten there was a break that he might say the Little Hours of the Office. Then more confessions. At eleven he returned to La Providence, to teach catechism to the children - especially to his orphans - and to a good many grown-ups.

At midday he said the Angelus and returned to the presbytery for lunch - the journey across the square taking a full quarter-hour, since the crowd was thick, and there was much demand for his advice and blessing. He ate standing up, and not in silence, since his friends took advantage of the meal to confide their troubles to him.

At half-past twelve he visited his sick - always under the escort of a crowd of anxious questioners.

Back at the church, he read Vespers and Compline; but the book was no more than closed when he was once again in the confessional, hearing the women till five, the men till eight.

Then he went up into the pulpit for evening prayers and the rosary of the Immaculate Conception.

After such a day, you think, perhaps, that he very rightly made for supper and bed. As to the supper, we cannot be sure; after all, he had to see certain more difficult cases - souls not easily convinced perhaps, or needing delicate direction. Also he had to finish his office - Matins and Lauds - the greater portion, so that by now it was never earlier than ten o'clock; and even then he occasionally returned to the church to hear more confessions - till midnight.

Then bed.

And remember: the new day, like the old, was to begin at one

o'clock.

It may amuse you to reckon it up. M. Vianney worked at least twenty hours - fifteen, sixteen, sometimes more, in the confessional, either in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist, where he heard the women, or in the hard wooden stall in the sacristy, where he heard the men.

Was he alone with God as much as two hours in the day? He was always with God.

And this was his time-table for thirty years.

Fortunately, there was God. And there was Sunday - with its prayer and preaching. His sermons were good when he gave the time to prepare them; far better when he spoke unprepared. For then he gave himself wholly, free of all constraint save the pressure of his love for God and man. He spoke with his voice - like another - and with his look, his body, his cries, his tears. It was as though he were locked in struggle with sin like an athlete in the ring, that he saw God and made men see him, that he sent rushing through his audience the strong wind of the spirit. His counsels - lofty, tender, generous - were more general than when he was preaching only to his own parishioners; but they were not less direct and familiar. Continually they moved the hearts of men unknown to him; they were for all - and they were for each.

As in the confessional, so in the pulpit, M. Vianney gave spontaneously, by intuition, the answers to just those doubts, hopes, supplications which held the hearts of those who sat in silence before him. In the confessional he fished with a line; in the pulpit with great casts of the net.

His parish was no longer his sole care. Since the world was turning to him, he turned upon the world. When cholera broke out at Paris, Marseilles, Lyons, - "Brethren," he cried, "God is sweeping the world."

He *acted* the Gospel in the pulpit. He hurled at the heads of his audience all the excesses of the saints: Saint John of God, who

chose to pass for an idiot in order to be despised of men; Saint Benedict, who caused Saint Maurus to walk on the water; the most "scandalous" of Saint Vincent Ferrier's miracles. It was easy enough to see his determination to set faith free from that sceptical naturalism with which it has usually entered into some sort of compromise, even in the best disposed souls.

Children's stories, you say! But like the child that he was, M. Vianney believed in them firmly and wanted the rest of men to believe as he did. "Become once again as little children" - that was the programme, so to say, that he set before his unbelieving hearers. Then, drawing on his own experience, without, of course, saying that it was his own, he taught that world, which thought itself so emancipated and so superior to morality, that the Gospel lived still, and the church, and sainthood, and miracles.

From end to end of the church the velvet collars, the greatcoats neatly drawn in at the waist, the feathered hats on the heads of the ladies, the silk hats in the hands of the gentlemen - not to speak of the blouses and smocks of the peasants - shook as with palsy before the unexpected gusts of these staggering truths.

When M. Vianney, in his weak, shrill voice, had spoken enough and cried out enough and cursed and blessed and wept enough, he came down from the pulpit. They struggled to be the first to touch his vestments. They went so far as to snip surreptitious pieces from his alb or his soutane. That made him laugh - for he never lost his good temper - -just as he laughed at the portrait of himself on sale outside. Every pilgrimage has its odd fancies - and no one left Ars without the curé's portrait. He never sat for his photograph, but there were snapshots. He called it his "carnaval."

High Mass, sermon and vespers were the three great joys of his Sunday. Occasionally there was a fourth: a rather longer visit to La Providence, his foundation, his refuge. He had fond dreams of retiring there - soon, when all this flurry of pilgrimages was over and done with, and he was allowed to hand everything on to his successor. He even thought of adding a chapel to it.

But it was for God to decide; and, though God did not decide in person so to say, the Church of God did.

The Church is rather cautious about saints: and rightly. She canonises them, afterwards, but she is rather distrustful at the time. She has a mission that demands prudence.

And nothing so closely resembles a true saint as a false saint.

For the most part, great saints are born in troubled times when, faith being at a low ebb, everyone is feeling the need of something to believe in, as, for instance, in the devil, in the goddess Liberty, in universal peace, in the transmigration of souls or in a new Messiah due next week. In such a time, the nearest quack doctor is a miracle worker, Tolstoi is a prophet, Rousseau a man sent from God.

In the curé's day, theosophy was the rage. Sects - half political, half religious - swarmed everywhere. Then as now souls were devoured with that thirst for God without God which lies behind romanticism; and all the more because, if religion still lived in the hearts of the people, the elite , at any rate, had apostatised in a body. It was a great day for charlatans, and a great day for the devil, since, being an angel, he has kept in full the powers of an angel and within the limits marked by God he can use them.

To raise up false saints in order to discredit the true is one of his cleverest tricks. They ape the true and usurp their place, and often it happens that men are taken in. Now the Church is always aware of the risk of being taken in; hence the length and scrupulous care of her enquiries.

The position is even graver when the false saint is a priest - for the Church's honour is involved. While if he is a parish-priest. . . .

M. Vianney was terrified to learn that in the long roll of the ages not a single parish-priest had been raised to the Church's altars as a saint. Popes had been canonised, cardinals and bishops, religious and laymen; but of parish-priests, not one; not the shadow of one. The melancholy inference was that there was no condition in the whole world in which sanctity was more difficult to attain. That is why he was so unsure of himself.

For the most part the neighbouring priests were favourable, as we have seen, but perhaps not quite as favourable as they had been. It is all very well not to be jealous, but obviously there ought to be some limit to other people's success. As for those who knew of him only by hearsay, they had no particular reason to believe all that they heard - and if they did happen to meet him, his wretched get-up could cause them nothing but shame.

He was accused of being dirty, which was not true. Unlike Saint Benedict Labre, he did not cultivate fleas. He gave some thought to the matter of clean underclothes. . . . But, in the exterior of his dress he preferred to give an example of evangelical poverty, as befitted a representative of Christ.

His one soutane was worn threadbare; he allowed it to be mended and cleaned; he let them brush it. And he only put it aside when it literally fell off him. His three-cornered hat lasted longer, because felt is tougher than cloth. It is difficult to imagine the shape it had got to before it lost its crown - as it had long lost its lining. As for his great peasant boots - he patched them endlessly as long as the patches would hold together. He never polished them; polish is, for leather, a sort of cosmetic - and as such a vanity.

In this rig he presented himself at the annual clergy retreat and even at the bishop's table.

The clergy of Lyons had always been rigidly conventional and had retained some of the stateliness of the eighteenth century. It saw in the curé a certain affectation. It suspected criticism! At clerical meetings some held aloof; some spoke at him, not kindly.

All of which was as it should be; his one object was to incur scorn and conceal the glory that compassed him.

"Yes; it is quite true that many consult me. But why? The look of me is enough; because I am and always will be the least priest in the diocese."

His unpardonable crime was that he led his neighbour's congregations astray. When people had in their own parish a priest - a learned, correct, worthy priest - was it likely that they would go

off to another, if that other did not use underhand means or unworthy self-advertisement to decoy them away?

And for what? Gracious heaven, for what? Surely it was notorious that this greasy little unwashed object had done deplorably in his studies, that he knew scarcely any Latin, that the whole of moral theology was practically a sealed book to him, and that it was out of pure charity that he was let through the examinations that he could not pass.

You see!

They hatched a plot. In many parishes people were forbidden, from the pulpit, to go asking for spiritual direction from a man so ignorant and vulgar, so incapable even of directing himself. Some parish priests threatened that those who disobeyed would be refused absolution. Finally, they came together and drew up a petition to the bishop against a state of things which was going from bad to worse and constituted a grave danger to souls.

It was not difficult to pile up proofs of these accusations. If the majority of penitents came away from Ars strengthened and enlightened in mind, there were also many who came away disappointed and - particularly was this so with pious women - annoyed.

There exists a certain class of souls (who think themselves a particularly good sort of soul, and say so, and are very anxious not to be confused with the common run of merely good) who are quite certain that God has no real interest but in them. They fling themselves on every new priest that begins to be talked of; no other having understood them, perhaps this one will. They solemnly unload before him all their pack of false perfections and false scruples, and unwrap them with great care, to show how very valuable they are. As for the priest, his duty is to let them analyse the state of their souls at their leisure, listen to the reading of their diary (which runs to the length of a novel), indicate suitably how sensible he is of the worth of these treasures, and, when it comes to spiritual direction, approve of the direction which they have already given themselves - or rather, which they have received direct from the Holy Spirit. Some of them claim to have been

favoured with visions. Others coolly instal themselves on such a rung (an upper rung, of course) of the Ladder of Humility, described by Saint Benedict in his rule, or in such a one of the castles of the soul wherein Saint Theresa dwelt. The luckless priest who is not prepared to play up to them is flung to the wolves.

This sort of fool - absurd yet formidable - came in force to Ars. Not a lunatic in the district, but flung herself like a demon on the curé's confessional. A skilled and prudent director would have listened to them and got rid of them politely; but that would require time, and M. Vianney had not a moment to waste. He was not there to cherish illusions in souls that did not want to be cured. He judged the case in a moment, broke into their futile confidences, gave short, sharp advice. Thus:

"Well, my child, say such and such a prayer and forget all that," or

"Ask your usual confessor; he knows what you need better than I."

When people of that sort took his advice badly and returned too often to the attack, he asked the women who looked after the church to take them away - politely, as the law of charity demands, but very firmly.

These misunderstood souls wasted not a moment on their return home. They told everyone - out of mere stupidity or active malice; they misreported the instructions he had given or his refusal to deal with them. And their parish priest was the first to be told.

There were not terms enough for the attack on M. Vianney; folly, excess of zeal, illuminism - that was but a beginning.

One unsigned letter ran:

"You disgrace your cloth."

Another, unsigned likewise, contained this: "They say you are a saint and yet all those who visit you do not come away converted. You would be well advised to temper your misdirected zeal; otherwise we shall find ourselves forced, reluctantly, to inform the

bishop."

A third reached almost the limit of audacity: "A man with as little theology as you ought never to enter a confessional."

M. Vianney recognised the writing of his fellow-priests. His reply is worth pondering:

"M. le Curé, I thank you very sincerely for the kindly advice you have been good enough to give me. I admit my ignorance and incompetence. If people from the neighbouring parishes have not been converted after receiving the sacraments from me, I am deeply grieved. If you see fit, you may write to the Bishop, who will, I hope, have the kindness to reprove me. Ask God, if you please, that I may do less harm and more good."

"How much cause I have to love you, my very dear and venerated colleague; you alone have rightly known me. Since you are so good and so charitable as to take an interest in my poor soul, help me to obtain the grace I have long prayed for, that, being replaced in a post I am unworthy to fill, I may withdraw into some obscure corner to weep for my wretched life. I have so much penance to do, so many tears to shed!"

The long and carefully planned petition, setting out the causes of complaint against him, was sent to him - either from bravado or from a certain remorse - by one of the priests who had signed it. M. Vianney added his signature and returned the document.

That is, he united himself with his accusers, to gain a disgrace which he agreed with them in thinking he deserved.

"I expected every moment," he said later, "to be driven out of the place with rods, to be suspended, and condemned to end my days in prison. It seemed to me that every one ought to have been poking a scornful finger at me for having remained so long in a parish where I could be nought but an obstacle to good."

Thus he thought himself not only unworthy to convert souls, but actually incapable. Only the roughest calculation is possible; but at the end of his life we may count his total of conversions at eighty

thousand. To him it seemed that he had done nothing, that another would have done more.

Basically his reasoning was just; it was reasoning as a saint reasons. Look at it dispassionately. He saw himself as a mere nothing. Grace poured through him, but without his action, perhaps even in spite of him, for he might even be an obstacle in the way of its flow. Under the same outpouring of grace, another more perfect would do more - either by active collaboration with it, or at any rate by letting nothing of himself get in the way. Other things being equal, as the mathematicians say, someone else would have been of more service than he, whether as a channel or as an instrument. They rated him low; he rated himself lower. They insulted him, he rejoiced - and sincerely, never doubt that. It is Saint Francis of Assisi who teaches that perfect joy lies in perfect abasement.

It is then that God lifts man up. The petition reached the bishop. The diocese of Belley, in which Ars lies, might well have fallen, like so many others, to a timorous bishop - an administrator rather than an apostle. The Church is human - as who does not know? - more human at times than the kingdoms of this world. God who yet preserves the Church in existence uses that very fact of its "human-ness" as a proof of of its essential divinity. When He sets at its head - or in the high places of its hierarchy - inadequate or worthless ministers, he wants only to test the quality of our faith. But in the present instance to protect a curé who was a saint he made choice of a bishop who was a saint.

The Abbé Monnin, who knew Mgr. Devie, never wearied of praising him. Tact, kindness, penetration, knowledge of men, love of souls - all these he had, and on the supernatural plane. He acknowledged receipt of the message and announced that the matter was under consideration. He knew what he was about: the unusual activities of the accused had never caused him any anxiety, nor made him feel that prudence demanded their moderation. As a matter of conscience - and to add weight to the decision that he was to make - he sent his vicars-general to Ars. They returned overwhelmed with admiration. What could anyone say to a man or think of a man who met his disgrace halfway, asked for it, had only one desire: "to hide in a hole to weep for his sins."

Monsignor Devie affectionately urged M. Vianney to submit to headquarters difficult cases of conscience. Out of two hundred cases submitted, there were only two that the subtlest of his theologians would have decided differently from the curé. Then the bishop gave his testimony:

"Gentlemen," he cried out one day, in the presence of a great number of ecclesiastics, including some of the opposition, "I wish you a little of the folly that you sometimes laugh at; it will not damage your wisdom."

Another day he declared, gravely and with great firmness: "Yes; he is a saint - a saint whom we must admire and take for our model."

And to one who expressed doubts of his knowledge: "I do not know if he is well taught; but he is inspired."

In 1838 Mgr. Devie came to Ars; he was received as usual, at the château, but M. Vianney did not appear at table. The bishop declared that he did not wish to put any constraint upon him, and that it was better to leave him the liberty he put to such holy uses.

On the bishop's death, M. Vianney inherited one of his rochets. He always refused to wear it, regarding it as a relic. He expected miracles from it, and was amazed that none happened!

So he stayed on at Ars, more firmly established than before the effort to dislodge him; his accusers came round completely and asked his pardon.

Perhaps it may be allowable to anticipate a little, to complete this chapter on the crosses wherewith M. Vianney was charged by Holy Mother Church. This last was, perhaps, the worst of all. But he knew how to bear it to his soul's profit.

In 1845, finding that the sheer mass of the work was beyond him, he asked for a curate. They thought they were doing him a good turn - which in its own quiet way Providence meant to make into a better turn - in sending to Ars a priest some forty years old, named M. Raymond.

M. Vianney, who was far older than the mere counting of years could make him, was already fifty-nine, and no one any longer doubted the genuineness of his sanctity or the quality of his mission. Esteemed, admired, venerated, loved - if he had been less humble and had had the time to spare, he might well have enjoyed his triumph. God doubtless willed to remove from him the least temptation to that most unlikely vice - pride. He sent him a conceited curate.

M. Raymond was under a heavy obligation to M. Vianney, who, with that great generosity which poured out into every kind of good work, had paid his way through the seminary. Catherine Lassagne tells us that he was a worthy priest with a strong sense of duty. But he thought a good deal of himself. His course of studies had been brilliant; he was intelligent; he spoke well. His fine breadth of shoulder and his powerful voice marked him out as one destined to command. He would show them that he was a born leader - when he got a first-class parish.

On his appointment to Ars, he seems to have imagined that the good curé, his benefactor - whom he did quite truly admire - intended to hand over the control of things and was no longer in possession of all his faculties. At any rate, he arrived with the full intention of taking his place at once.

The poor harassed old man - M. Raymond saw clearly - needed a substitute and a protector. The pilgrimages which were constantly growing, demanded a firmer, more youthful, and, above all, better organised direction. The crowd had degenerated into a rabble. The pilgrims thought they could do as they liked. It was high time that matters were taken firmly in hand and reduced to something like order.

The one thing M. Raymond overlooked was that "matters" depended entirely on the holiness of M. Vianney, and that whoever was to replace the old man must have an equal stock of that!

In all this you may see what a blind, absurd, inconsequent animal is man. M. Raymond knew that M. Vianney was a saint - yet he proposed to take his place.

He began by taking the curé's bedroom. The curé was quite content to be relegated to a ground floor room, a little dark perhaps, and damp - no matter; in any case it would save him the trouble of going upstairs. On the parish books M. Raymond signed, not "Raymond, vicaire," but, "Raymond, curé."

Nothing pleased him; he began on the subordinates - the worthy brother Athanasius, the women at La Providence, M. Vianney's bodyguard - finally M. Vianney himself. He required the curé to tell him all he was doing and all he proposed to do. He did not suggest modifications; he decided them on his own authority and carried them through. M. Vianney having said something from the pulpit that he did not like, he got up after him and contradicted it.

M. Vianney did not protest. He paused a moment, then submitted with resignation. It was his entourage that interfered to recall the curate to sanity and to some sense of the true proportion of things. A deputation of parishioners politely requested the abbe to cease interfering with the lifelong habits of the old man. They forced the curé to return to his own room. If M. Raymond was not satisfied with the ground floor room, he might lodge in the village. It may be that he realised something of the extent of his blunder. He went to lodge in the village.

But the lesson had no fundamental effect. M. Raymond would always be M. Raymond, and the unfortunate curé had to bear with him for eight long years. Catherine Lassagne declared - and all Ars agreed with her, since Ars had come to a way of looking at everything from a spiritual point of view - that this wretched young man "was sent by God to try His servant's patience."

We have already outlined the plan of the curé's day. Full as it already was of anxiety and the pressure of troubled souls, it now had the added misery of harshness, reprimands, ceaseless contradiction from the priest who had come to relieve him.

After all, what was there to change M. Raymond? M. Vianney was on his side, skilful in finding excuses for him, obedient to his whims, defending him against his accusers. M. Raymond could not guess how much he made the curé suffer.

If he made him suffer, he made him progress - in the path of humility, self-abnegation, penance - so that souls did get a kind of profit out of it. If M. Raymond was not a saint, he made M. Vianney more of a saint than ever. That is why he came; that is why he remained. M. Vianney wanted him there.

"If you make trouble for him - very well. I shall leave with him."

Still pressure was continuous and at last he agreed to ask that his curate should be removed, on condition that he was assured of a good place elsewhere. But when he read over the letter which he had dictated to Brother Athanasius, he tore it in four, with the simple comment: "Our Lord bore his cross during these holy days [it was Holy Week at the time]. I can quite well do the same."

At last, after eight years, it occurred to M. Raymond to realise just how unpopular he was. He suggested his own removal, realising apparently that a saint is the best person to succeed a saint. He was appointed curé elsewhere. M. Vianney, who regretted him deeply, wrote the day after his departure:

"You have been so useful to me. You have done me so many services, that you have my heart in chains."

It is impossible not to believe that the Abbé Raymond had occasional good days. He saw the saint before his death and offered to write his life. It is clear that he admired him; only he admired himself more. He thought that holiness must bow before intelligence, whereby he not only deceived himself, but also flattered himself. For a saint is always more intelligent in his very ignorance than a clever man who does not happen to be a saint.

M. Vianney missed M. Raymond's nagging.

"You say nothing," he complained to his successor, "you do not rebuke me. . . . I am no longer as good as before."

It was quite true. He had just had one of his instruments of penance taken from his hand. He must set about finding another, which was a great nuisance.

It is the will of God that gives and takes away; it is part of its mystery that it gives much that it may take much away, and takes much away that it may give still more. The orphanage of La Providence - the work nearest his heart - had meanwhile been taken out of his hands. From that, too, as from all things earthly he had to be set free.

We shall soon have to speak at greater length of M. Vianney's "flights." After the first of these, in 1843, the fear that one day they might lose the curé for good had caused the inmates to leave the house. Most of them had to come back; but the damage was done. High authority began to have its doubts of the security of the foundation. After all, it was entirely dependent on the devotion of three women - Catherine Lassagne, Marie Filliat, Jeanne-Marie Chanay. Probably these three were training up those who might replace them. But what would happen if the curé died - or retired to his native village, or even went into a monastery? It was obviously the most elementary prudence to put the place on a more secure basis, to regularise things.

In all this the Bishop of Belley had no other object than the greater good of La Providence. As a security for its future he decided to put it in the hands of a religious congregation. He informed M. Vianney.

It was like asking an artist who has roughed out a masterpiece to give it over to another to finish as he thinks. M. Vianney did not suffer from any jealous sense of ownership. Still less was there any of the vanity of an author. But this was different. His "Providence" was part of his life, a thing necessary to the working of his apostolate; it prayed for him, suffered for him. Miracles had shown how close it lay under the protection of heaven. Coming out of the confessional, overborne, agonised by the shame and wretchedness of sinners, M. Vianney had always been able to fly to it as to a refuge where the world's sin found no entry, where he might breathe - if only for a moment - a purer air. It was there that his clothes were mended and his meals prepared - those meals which, just by being too good for him, bore witness to the charity of the cooks. It was there, too, that he catechised - his one chance in the day to preach in public the Word on which his own heart fed.

Imagine the scene. In the ground-floor room, on the left, off the

corridor, all his children were in rows before him. The pilgrims - not to be kept out - were massed round the door or in the windows opening on the road. There, from eleven to twelve, he was a child again, and spoke as a child, to children - the Gospel way. It was as though from the looks of the children, unsullied by sin, he drew great draughts of Divine Truth, which he might pour back in overflowing measure - a perfect exchange. Strangers felt it and never wearied of it. What need of change, the curé asked unhappily, in this paradise of innocence?

Yet he had to submit in resignation to the bishop's decision. The Sisters of Saint Joseph took charge. Catherine and the others had to leave. Very soon - for reasons we do not know - the orphanage was given up. The orphans were sent away like their one-time mistresses. The school continued - but the education of children had never interested M. Vianney vitally.

Farewell, then, to the hostelry of the Good Samaritan and the house of Bethany. Jeanne-Marie Chanay went to live with her parents.

Catherine Lassagne and Marie Filliat set up near the presbytery, where from now on M. Vianney took his meals, and devoted their lives to the sick, to the curé, and to the care of the church.

That was all.

M. Vianney bore no grudge against the new sisters. They were not dependent on him, but he visited them; inaugurated their chapel; received the renewal of their vows. The parish school for girls prospered, like the boys' school, directed by Brother Athanasius. He rejoiced at it - but it was no longer his house. It had been the one attachment remaining in his heart to a thing here on earth; and God broke it suddenly, ruthlessly, leaving his servant only the pulpit, the confessional and the altar.

In the sufferings of which his life was woven, this was the worst. But it meant something: he was no longer Curé of Ars simply for Ars; but for France and the world.

The Devil Comes in Person

No saint has escaped temptation. Three times was the Master of them all tempted by the evil one - in the desert, on the high mountain, on the pinnacle of the temple. The devil was beaten then; but the devil never learns from his defeats. He keeps on in the hope that if nine hundred and ninety-nine saints are too much for him, there may yet, some day, be a thousandth.

Saints, he feels, are game worth hunting, just because they are so difficult to bring down. The souls of ordinary men, slaves of the flesh, not overmuch concerned as to their last end, are - not exactly not worth bagging - but at least poor sport, easily come by. A touch to the pride, a pleasing shape offered to the eye of lust, a jerk to cupidity - and a soul goes rolling down the slope. Into the crack caused in the nature common to all men by original sin and widened in each individual man by such sins as he chooses to commit on his own account, the devil simply slips his thumb from time to time, to make sure that it remains open - and the habit of sin does the rest.

Even in the armour of a saint there are chinks. But prayer, penance, good works and the grace of God combine to mend the rents and strengthen the weak places. It often requires nothing short of angelic skill to discover the exact spot - perhaps the only spot - where the knife point may be slipped through. But the Evil Spirit, "the Prince of this World," and his myriad satellites are, even in their fall, angels; and their fall has not changed their essence or the sort of knowledge proper to it. They wander round the world - with God's permission - with intent to destroy us. Often enough they do destroy us, though often, again, they give us opportunities to gain merit; but they try not to think of this.

For the greater part they are hidden; they carry out their plans incognito. They know that man is very touchy about his liberty and that when he refuses to bend before God's grace it is not simply that he may be enslaved to the commands of another master. They are careful not to alarm man or anger him. They disguise themselves as his inclinations, his faulty reasonings, his fancies; for a man is not

likely to be distrustful of what he thinks issues from himself.

When they find a man striving along the way of perfection, they make use of his virtues rather than his vices; they urge him to resolutions too great to be kept; they get him to place too heavy a burden on his heroism - and then they wait for him to grow weary. They imitate the inspirations of the Holy Ghost and parody the good angels. When they manage to make a saint conscious of his sanctity, his sanctity is half conquered. But their most deadly weapon is the scruple that eats into a man's resolution, sets it wavering, even swings it bodily from its true end or paralyses its striving.

When they have tried in vain all the hidden tricks they know, they tear off their mask - to be precise, they assume a body, or at any rate, a bodily appearance, to intimidate or terrorise or it may be merely to harass their victim. And as they have a certain control of matter they can produce sounds, gleams of light, mists, movements of every kind. Their power is limited only by the Will of God.

All this is very far from that notion of evil in the abstract which is such a comfort to so many good Christians.

When our world sees some great happening in the spiritual order, do not dream that the devils remain unconcerned.

We shall never know here on earth in what measure God allowed the demon to tempt M. Vianney in the living depths of his soul.

It would seem that man's ancient enemy soon gave up the effort to conquer him on the side of human weakness; there was no success to be hoped for against such a degree of faith, abnegation and love. The fiend tried perhaps to sow doubts of his vocation, of the rightness of his penances, of the value of his work. Certainly he had something to do with that temptation to flee which, as we shall see, assailed the curé more than once.

At any rate, we may assume that he met a good many defeats and disappointments; his own action proves it very thoroughly. After all, if he could have managed to upset the soul, he would scarcely

have assailed the body with such childish obstinacy. Noises, blows - for a spirit, these are only a forlorn hope. The devil - "le grappin," as M. Vianney called him - was dissatisfied with his results, and he showed it. He showed it to the Curé d'Ars from 1824 to 1858 - thirty-five years - the fool!

His idea presumably was to weary out the saint, to keep him from prayer;, perhaps, quite simply, to keep him from sleep and so diminish the activity of the curé's ministry - which was becoming a serious hindrance to the devil's own operations - or even get him out of the place; in any case to spite the curé and save his own' face by a display of his power, for when you are searching for the devil's motives, never overlook his pride.

But, you say, why did God let him? His wretched servant was already giving to souls twenty hours out of the twenty-four. He tried to close his eyes and could not. Must he give his sleep too?

God was more ambitious for His saint than we are. He wanted to place him, in the eternity of his glory, as near as possible to Himself, one of the stars of the first brilliance. That sort of thing has to be paid for, and even then you get it for nothing. God showed also that there is no limit to self-oblation and that His grace can make up what His chosen ones lack - not only in knowledge, wisdom, strength, health, but even in sleep or food.

It is worth our while to look at some of the demon's "tricks."

According to the most recent biography, they began towards the beginning of the winter of 1824-1825. The curé's pitiless asceticism had brought him to the point of death. He did, in fact, think he was dying; and prepared himself in fear and trembling, counting all he had done so far as a mere nothing - as indeed it was by comparison with all that he was yet to do.

The devil set about turning his fears into despair, magnifying his weaknesses into deadly sins. He pictured abysses opening before the curé's feet, and he murmured in his ear: "Soon you must fall into hell."

But a true saint is never guilty of despair. After agonies unknown to us, he put the devil in his place, and on his recovery, he answered as a saint answers, by redoubled courage and zeal.

He had just acquired the house where he was to set up his "Providence." In a place where already there was too much prayer, such a new reservoir of prayer and charity was an additional menace to his security which the devil could not ignore. He began his attacks at once, his persecutions taking the particular form which the Abbé Saudreau - who has studied much in this field - calls infestation.

The devil was there, but unseen; he had at his disposal gusts of wind, crowbars, every sort of musical instrument; he gave the impression of being everywhere and nowhere; of being one and myriad; for his name is Legion. He varied his effects, then repeated one single effect endlessly. The word "infestation" is right. The house was infested with him; he swarmed like a rat. At first M. Vianney thought it was a rat. He was lying in his curtained bed and suddenly heard what sounded like a light pattering; the animal approached the bed, clawed the curtains, gnawed at them. M. Vianney got up to frighten him. The noise ceased: there was no sign of a rat. No sooner was he back in bed than it all began again. Armed with a pitchfork he shook the curtains and scraped about the floor. The rat gnawed away all night, and for nights on end, but there was not a tooth mark in the curtains.

This, however, frequently as it happened, was only the beginning. Once, at nine in the evening, M. Vianney, who had not yet gone to bed, was startled by three mighty blows on the door of the yard- "as if," he said, "someone wanted to smash it in with a club." And he went on: "I immediately opened my window and asked, 'Who is there?5 But I saw nothing and went quietly to bed, recommending myself to God. I was not asleep when three more blows, struck this time not on the outer door, but on the door on the stairs leading to my bedroom, made me jump. I got up and cried a second time: 'Who is there?5 No one replied. When the noise began, I took it that it was thieves, with designs on the beautiful ornaments presented [to the Church] by the Vicomte d'Ars, and I thought I had better take precautions. I asked two stout men to sleep at the presbytery to

help in case of need. They came several nights running. They discovered nothing and remained convinced that the noise had another cause than the wickedness of men. I myself became certain of it, for one night in winter when much snow had fallen, three mighty blows were heard about midnight. I sprang instantly out of bed; I shot downstairs into the yard, thinking that this time I should catch the criminals in flight and intending to summon help. But to my great surprise, I heard nothing, and what is more, I saw no footprint in the snow. Then I no longer doubted that it was the devil who wanted to frighten me. I abandoned myself to God's will, praying to him to be my protector and my guardian, to come near me with his angels when my enemy should again decide to torment me."

It is worth noting that the poor curé was in deadly fear when this new sort of trial began. He would have had no fear of martyrdom, but he lay in bed with his teeth chattering because of a few noises that he could not explain. He was not yet at home, so to speak, with the devil and his peculiar ways.

Satan tried new pleasures. He set the bed curtains tossing, upset chairs, disarranged the furniture. He hammered nails into the floor, plied saw, plane, and axe as though he would smash the house to fragments. Again, he imitated the tread of a gendarme on the stairs: drummed on the table, the chimney - piece, the water pot; pranced, like a fiery steed, in the room downstairs, and landed with ringing hoofs on the flagstones in the yard; yelled outside the house like a troop of Cossacks; quarrelled, argued, "held his parliament in the yard," as the curé put it. As a substitute for a cavalry charge in the street, he arranged that a flock of sheep should come pouring out of the barn.

It is interesting to glance through Catherine Lassagne's notes on this subject. Under one date, M. Vianney told her that "the *grappin* has begun to make a noise like someone binding a cask with iron hoops"; on the 18th August, 1825, there was a musical interlude - the devil "up the chimney singing like a nightingale." Another time he roared like a lion; again, he sang a song: "The fiend has a very ugly voice," comments M. Vianney.

On nights of special rage he shook the saint by the feet; passed

"what felt like a hand over his face"; sniffed at him like a dog, and vomited gravel and such like; dragged him in his bed round the room, lifted him out of bed, sometimes hurled him down. Occasionally, but very rarely, he tried gentle means instead of savage; tried to soften him, slipped a down cushion under his body, swathed him in it, cradled him, with obscene sighs.

He attacked him also in broad daylight, even away from the presbytery. Once when the curé was preaching a mission at Montmerle, he felt himself shaken and re-shaken in the confessional. Another time, on the road to Saint-Trivier, the bushes interlocked as though to prevent him passing. And often he found, on coming home, the picture of the Annunciation- to which he was very much attached - absolutely covered with filth.

It is worth adding that the devils sometimes spoke to their victim. They did not shrink from lowering their masks to spit their hate in his face and admit their plans:

"Vianney! Vianney! Eater of potatoes! We shall have you alright! We've got you!"

But if they really had got him, they would have taken fine care not to say so.

Did M. Vianney actually see the devil with his bodily eyes? Once in the form of a cloud of bats which darkened his bedroom. Again at three in the morning, in the cemetery, in the form of a black dog, "with blazing eyes and bristling hair, scratching the earth" at a spot where had just been buried a man who had died without confession. But if he did not see him often, he knew his scent afar off, and could recognise him under many disguises.

On all these undeniably diabolic happenings, we have countless witnesses. The most sceptical enquirers emerge fearful but convinced.

One of the devil's very last tricks, three years before the curé's death, was to set fire to his bed in broad daylight. It was during the Forty Hours. M. Vianney had gone out shortly after midnight to

hear confessions. At seven o'clock passers-by rushed to warn him that there were flames in his room. M. Vianney handed over his key, but he was quite calm: "This wretched fiend," he said; "he has not been able to catch the bird, so he has burnt the cage."

They found the bed burnt and the canopy and the curtains and the furniture near the bed. But the flames had stopped at the level of a relic of Saint Philomena, so that a perfectly straight line could have been drawn from the limit of damage on the floor to the limit of damage on the ceiling. No one could make out why the fire had not spread further on the ceiling, which was "very low, very old and very dry." It had caught for no apparent reason and had died out for no apparent reason.

"For a long time," said M. Vianney, "I have asked this favour of God; at last he has granted it. I am truly the poorest in the parish; they all have a bed. . . . I no longer have one."

If we are tempted to find his tone surprising, we must remember that the curé had had the devil's company thrust on him for some thirty years, and that these nocturnal visits, as the Abbé Monnin tells us, took place "hundreds of times a year."

"The grappin and I," said the curé, "are, in a sense, comrades."

He never minded speaking of the devil. In the first place, he thought that to speak of him contemptuously would be one sure blow to his pride, for tricks of this sort seemed to the curé too absurd to bring any glory, even to the victim - much less to their inventor. Again, he bore witness before men - who have fallen into a perilous scepticism on the point - of the harsh reality of the world of evil spirits wherewith ours is compenetrated.

Had the devil's only object been to keep the curé from sleeping, he would have scored a notable victory. M. Vianney came downstairs of a morning with sunken eyes and pallid face, stumbling, shaken, at the end of his strength - if not of his patience and his hope. All night he kept his lamp burning that he might see on the walls the images of his beloved saints and might turn his sleeplessness to use by praying to them more intensely.

When the devil attacked him, he armed himself, so he tells us, with the sign of the cross. He said a prayer. Occasionally he addressed a few slighting words to the adversary. At such times the other stayed quiet, then began his uproar once more. But the louder grew the din, the happier was the curé; for he had noticed that this was the signal that a great sinner was coming to him, under the impulse of God's grace; invariably he found on the next day that his net held "a big fish."

We have the verbatim record of a conversation between the curé and a possessed woman. It was on the afternoon of the 23rd January, 1840, in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist, and eight others were present. The devil spoke through the mouth of this woman and poured out all his complaints against the saint:

"You ugly black toad, how you make me suffer. . . . We war on one another. . . . But for all that, it does sometimes happen that you work for me. . . . Why do you examine the conscience of your penitents? Isn't what I make them do enough? You were anxious to withdraw into solitude. Why don't you? Why do you rise so early? You are disobeying the bishop, who has ordered you to take care of yourself. Why do you preach so simply? You pass for an ignorant man. Why don't you preach like a great man, as they do in the towns? Ah! how I delight in those great sermons which do no harm to anyone, but leave people to live in their own way and do what they like. . . ."

Another possessed woman declared to the saint: "If there were three like you on earth, my kingdom would be destroyed. You have taken more than eighty thousand souls from me."

Certainly the demon lost his head. Rage blinded him. He said anything. He coaxed and threatened; he pleaded the cause of obedience - he whose disobedience had been his ruin - and at the same time he admitted what he stood to gain. He was baffled, and he threw down his cards in sheer temper.

By now M. Vianney no longer feared him. Set by grace on the highest plane of sanctity, he towered over him. But the devil was

not always fighting in the open. He had not exhausted all his resources by plaguing and harassing the poor priest. He ruined his sleep and perhaps by that very fact disturbed that peace which seems a necessary condition of self-examination and collected prayer. If in the saint's self-examination he found some advantage, he was too clever to say so. He knew that M. Vianney was sufficiently scrupulous to have doubts of himself. Thus from time to time he left him to his doubts, and did what he could to strengthen them.

M. Vianney converted- or thought he converted - souls, more souls, souls without number. But what was he making of his own? Always concerned with sinners, what about a little concern for himself? And well he might ask himself sternly whether he was following the true way: in never giving thought to his own salvation and the means for ensuring it, was he not being untrue to his primary duty - which was to save his own soul? To be saved, to be a saint (it's all one) is to see God; and if one is to see Him in heaven, surely one must prepare on earth. When was he going to prepare?

There was the vulnerable spot in that strong soul. On that spot were to converge the attacks of all the sophisms in his great temptation.

Jean-Marie Vianney was less than eleven when he prayed to God to give him solitude before any other good, that he might meditate on His goodness and His glory, that he might advance still further in His intimacy. He was a born contemplative.

This childhood prayer he had never retracted; the older he grew, the stronger grew his desire to live alone. Yet here he was flung into a life crammed with activity, devoured with works, jostled by crowds, and with no leisure to ask himself if he lived well and acted in full accord with the Will of God.

Between two exercises, two confessions, almost between two doors! - M. Vianney scarcely managed to snatch a few flying minutes of interior silence, to look into his own soul and put himself into the right disposition to receive from heaven a ray of light, a word of command or direction.

"Let us leave him at it," said the devil to himself one day. M. Vianney examined himself, asked questions. … It seemed that someone replied.

But who?

Was it himself? True zeal, self-denial, love? or selfishness, sloth, fear of the work to be done?

Was it God, determined to remove his servant from fruitless activity?

Was it the devil?

It is not easy to trace the precise origin of feelings, ideas, reasons which pass through the mind in silence. When two motives seem to press, who knows whether the one that seems to have most weight has not been inspired by his own egoism or by the devil?

"You are saving souls but losing your own."

"Man has been created for God; it is your appetite for God that you should follow."

"Go, withdraw. Do not wait till the point of death to set your soul in order."

"You have not too much time to weep for your poor sins. Do it quickly!"

As far as we can judge, M. Vianney was always in the presence of God. In the person of each of those pilgrims who followed in unending line all day and all night through the confessional, it was Christ Our Lord that he saw, that he loved, that he consoled; but Christ through a veil. There was to be no peace or joy for him save in seeing Him face to face.

It seemed to the curé that he would never give full proof or full measure of his love for his Lord till he could pour out his remaining strength to the last drop in seeking Him without a moment's interruption in the tete-a-tete of prayer. All his acts were prayers; but he dreamt of one single act which should be one single prayer -

the one essential prayer - sufficient in itself, exclusive, unending.

The devil does, of course, know that the prayer of a saint - a Trappist in his desert or a Carthusian in his prison - is of more power over the heart of God - and hence of more efficacy for the salvation of souls than all external works. But he was obsessed by the hope of an immediate result - the stoppage of the pilgrimages. In that hope, he tried to urge the saint along the difficult road of greater holiness. How could M. Vianney have any suspicion of an aspiration so righteous and so obviously in conformity with the demands of divine love?

His mind was made up.

In 1827 he paid a visit to his bishop to ask that he might be removed. The bishop offered him the parish of Fareins. M. Vianney dared not admit that it was the cloister that he sought. So he stayed on at Ars. But by night his soul took wing, to join the Trappists or the Carthusians - any corner would do for prayer and penance. Soon the temptation became stronger. He no longer hid the strength of the attraction. The rumour of it spread rapidly. The bishop gave no sign. "God gives me practically all I ask for," said the curé to Catherine Lassagne, "save when I pray for myself." To which she retorted tactlessly: "That is because you are asking God to take you from Ars and God does not wish to."

At last, unable to hold out any longer, he seized the chance of a very dark night and towards two o'clock he slipped out of the presbytery, and leaving the village behind, dashed along the road. What was his plan? He did not know. He arrived at the cross of Les Combes. Perhaps it was the cross that stopped him. He suddenly asked himself whether he was doing God's will in running away? He returned as quickly as he had come and resumed his chain. The whole thing was short and sharp, like a spurt of blood. We may imagine the disappointment of the devil, who must have been following with noiseless steps, chuckling and rubbing his hands. This first attempt at flight took place round about 1840.

Then he fell ill. For several years he had suffered frantically with neuralgia and gastric troubles. In 1843, on the third day of Our Lady's month, he fainted away during prayers. He was carried to

the presbytery and the doctor diagnosed pleuro-pneumonia, which - given a body starved, worn to shreds, verging on sixty - does not leave a great deal of hope; for the heart was weakened.

But M. Vianney wanted to live. He heard, as he tells us, the demons shrieking in triumph round his bed: "This time we have you."

Then he let the doctor look after him.

The pilgrims, lacking occupation, wandered about the church and about the village. They stoutly refused to go to confession to any other priest - for, naturally, the bishop had sent a substitute to Ars. Baskets full of images and medals were brought to the curé, who blessed them as he lay in bed, weeping. The more fervent would not leave Saint Philomena's altar, where they lit endless trees of candles, sent up prayers without number. The voice of a suffering Christian people rose to heaven, demanding a miracle.

On the eleventh, a bell tinkled. M. Vianney was receiving the last sacraments from the curé of Jassans. In an instant the crowd filled the stairway, the little yard, all the approaches to the house. They learned that the curé had made a special prayer to Saint Philomena, "promising a hundred masses in her honour, and asking that a large candle should be set burning before her image."

Then he lost consciousness; it seemed to be the end. The doctor, taking his pulse, murmured: "Another thirty minutes; no more."

M. Vianney heard him, and thought (here again we have his own account), "My God, must I then appear before you empty-handed?"

He prayed with fierce intensity to Our Lady Queen of Angels, and his little saint, and immediately opened his eyes and could speak.

Next morning, as there was still some life in him, the first of the promised hundred masses was said. It is easy to imagine the desperate fervour of the parishioners and the pilgrims. During this Mass, at the crisis of the fever, M. Vianney grew suddenly calm. His attendant, Pertinand, the schoolmaster, saw his eyes grow fixed and seem to smile at someone. His face was extraordinarily happy. Several times he pronounced, very gently, the name of Philomena.

Then, emerging from his ecstasy, he said to the schoolmaster: "My friend. . . . I am cured."

When the faithful came out from church, the miracle was accomplished.

Sixteen days later M. Vianney could come down to the church to say his Mass. But he interpreted this miraculous curé - which he had begged God to give him that he might have time to prepare his soul for death - as a clear indication that he must embrace a contemplative life. He allowed himself time to recover his strength; took two decent meals a day with meat at midday and a quarter of a glass of old Bordeaux. He did not even reject the doctor's advice of a complete change of air. Besides, the bishop ordered him to rest and appointed M. Raymond to look after the parish. So the curé wrote to ask his brother to get a room ready for him in the old house at Dardilly. His idea was to stay there till he had received from diocesan headquarters an appointment to some tiny spot where he might have much time for prayer.

This was the oddest of all illusions, since obviously wherever he went the pilgrims would go too. It was part of his incredible humility that he would not admit, even to himself, that crowds came to Ars for the curé.

His parishioners had no definite warning; but they had their doubts of him. Wherefore, as on the previous occasion, he took the precaution of slipping away by night. He had not the heart to go off without a farewell to La Providence. They cried out, and of course they told the town. By ten in the evening the whole parish was on the watch. M. Vianney dared not risk the door; he climbed over the hedge at the back. The crowd saw him, rushed after him, implored him to return.

The schoolmaster caught up to him beyond le Formans, and walked with him, since he could not bend him from his purpose. Ten rosaries running, seven hours' walk, and the curé re-entered his parents' house.

He had only one night's peace. The next day, Thursday, the Comte des Garets came in person to Dardilly. He was not admitted. The

bishop sent an urgent message to the effect that he would not allow M. Vianney to take a parish outside the diocese of Belley.

Finally, on the Friday, all the pilgrims came from Ars in a body and flung themselves on the house to make their confessions. "Ars was no longer in Ars."

What could the luckless priest do but apply for faculties from the Bishop of Lyons and hear confessions as before?

On Saturday came a deputation of twenty-three young men from his old parish. The curé began to have doubts whether after all his will was God's will. He promised to go to Fourvieres and pray to Our Lady for light.

On Monday came the end. At dawn, guided by his brother, who disliked the crowds and the noise, and who saw horrid visions of an endless future of crowds and noise, Jean-Marie left the family home, never to see it again. He was met by his curate, the Abbé Raymond, who had undertaken to bring him to Notre Dame-de-Beaumont, sixty miles or so distant, in the heart of the Dombes. He had scarcely arrived and said his Mass, when he declared: "God does not want me here. Let us get back to Ars."

Weeping, praying, from Beaumont to Amberieux by coach, from Amberieux to Ars on foot, he said never a word. His own steeple came in sight - the two bells rang. The whole parish was there, not excluding the thrashers of corn, who had left their work to look after itself.

"So all was lost?" he said. "Ah, well! all is recovered. I shall not leave you, my children."

Several times he made a tour of the place - sobbing in his joy. His hands trembled as he gave his blessing. He had promised not to leave them; he kept his promise for ten years.

When, after a few days' rest, he saw the sea of pilgrims round his confessional, he said in all simplicity: "What would have become of so many poor sinners?"

Are we to believe that this thought had not occurred to him earlier? Could the temptation to flee have been so strong that it drove away all consideration of their needs?

In a saint there is an immense amount of paradox. We of the outer world cannot conceive the poignancy of the drama with which his soul was torn when - at the very last point of his self-oblation - he could find no further depth of mortification save in the clash of the two great commandments (which are ultimately but one commandment, the same commandment, says Our Lord) - "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. . . .

"And thy neighbour as thyself."

The saint was in an agony of fear that each thing given to his neighbour was taken from God, each thing given to God was taken from his neighbour. In fact, of course, a gift to one was a gift to the other.

Prayer or works? Works or prayer? Till the end of his life the curé never came to terms with the dilemma.

Doubtless God replies: "Works in prayer," or "Prayer in works." But He so arranges that this luminous reply never .brings peace to His elect.

A contemplative would be too happy - and by consequence checked in his development - if he did not sometimes look with envy on the external activity of the apostle; the apostle likewise - if he were not sometimes jealous of the hidden prayer of the contemplative. So it sometimes happens that God hurls the contemplative into the midst of the world's strife and sends the apostle off into the desert. This disappointment, which is a gift from God, takes both of them further than they could ever have gone by following the obvious line of their vocation.

M. Vianney submitted; but he was not cured. The disease, of which the germ was in his system this fifty years - the love of God for God's sake - was always liable to break out in fresh places. His

parishioners could not credit that he had sinned. M. Vianney did not commit sins - which was what alarmed them. For clearly, if his previous desertion had the shadow of a justification in conscience, he would assuredly do it again; it was merely a question of the breath of the Spirit.

In 1846 M. Vianney was enrolled in the Third Order of Mary. In 1848 he became a Franciscan Tertiary. He thought of becoming a Capuchin - said so in confession, and was strongly advised against it by one of the fathers. Meanwhile, however, the Marists had founded a house for contemplatives at La Neyliere- a house of perpetual silence.

This seems to have struck him as a first-class opportunity. The saintly Bishop of Belley had just died - and it was his strength and his friendship which had seemed the sole obstacle to the curé's desire.

Was this mental aberration or inspiration? Could the curé have thought he was at liberty? At any rate, on 1st September, at midday, he told Catherine Lassagne in confidence that on the fifth he was going to stay with a brother-in-law near Lyons, as a preliminary to joining the community at La Neyliere.

The good woman shrieked aloud; he bade her be silent. As it chanced, on the very next day, the Abbé Raymond, his conceited curate, introduced a new assistant, M. Toccanier, a simple man, kindly and full of zeal, and informed him that the new bishop would henceforth supply as many curates as might be needed. Naturally, the cure regarded this as a sign from heaven!

Fundamentally he knew that the bishop would be opposed to his going, wherefore he decided not to let him know till it was too late. To this end, he entrusted a letter to Catherine Lassagne, perhaps this, which it is very difficult to date with certainty; or if not this, one like it in tone:

"Monseigneur,

"I grow steadily weaker. I am forced to spend a part of the night on a chair or to rise three or four times an hour. I suffer from fits of

dizziness in the confessional in which I lose consciousness for two or three minutes. . . .

"Considering my infirmities and my age, I wish to bid adieu to Ars for ever.

"Vianney, poor unhappy priest."

Catherine Lassagne, by arrangement with the cure, confided the secret to Marie Filliat. The poor women, death in their heart, were ready to help their beloved cure to escape. One was to carry the provisions; but at his age - over sixty-seven - he obviously could not make so long a journey on foot. They took the sacristan into their councils, that he might see about a conveyance. But the sacristan told Brother Athanasius, and Brother Athanasius told M. Toccanier.

"Keep watch," said the new curate, "if he starts off, call me."

At midnight the curate was at his post in the square. Through the window he could see M. Vianney, equipped with a breviary, a hat and an umbrella, obviously preparing to leave the house.

The cure came downstairs, went to meet Catherine and Marie, one bearing a basket, the other a lantern. But the curate, the sacristan and Brother Athanasius barred his path.

"You have sold me," said M. Vianney

"Where are you going?" asked Brother Athanasius. "You want to leave us. Very well, we shall sound the alarm."

The sacristan added: "And we shall follow you in procession."

"Good," replied the saint, whose mind was quickly made up. "Let me go."

But the sacristan seized the lantern. Making a show of guiding him, he lit the way, not to the little bridge over the Formans, but to a winding road which led back to the village.

By now the sound of voices had alarmed the pilgrims who watched at the entrance to the church and round about the presbytery. M.

Vianney was caught. But he would listen to no one. He started off again on his flight. As he was about to cross the stream at the little bridge, M. Toccanier again argued with him.

"You will go no further, M. le Curé." And he took away his breviary.

"Give it me back."

But the breviary had vanished.

"Very well, I shall say my office at Lyons."

Marie Filliat retorted: "What! will you go a whole day without saying your office."

"I have another at home. I shall go and get it."

So back he went to the presbytery. There they heard the bell sounding the Angelus. M. Vianney fell on his knees and devoutly recited it.

In his library, which had been tossed about in wild confusion, he had a long search for the breviary. In the course of it, his eyes chanced to fall on the portrait of the dead bishop.

"Fie is frowning at you from heaven," said the curate.

"No, no - he will not scold me; he knows now that I need to weep for my poor life."

Obstinacy - or it may have been indecision - gave his face an expression of fixed gloom. He almost collided with the mayor and shot out into the yard.

But the yard was thronged with people. They took him gently by the arm, met his gloom with smiles. He seemed to soften - smiled, wept; but he did not yield. He managed to get the door open; then a battalion of women swept out of the church, flung themselves at his knees.

"Don't go without hearing my confession" - "and mine" - "and mine. . . ." "Don't go at all."

M. Toccanier took advantage of the incident.

"What, M. le Curé, you know the lives of the saints by heart, yet you forget the devotion of Saint Martin, who, with his hand already on the crown, cried, 'I do not refuse the work.' And Saint Philip Neri, who said that if he were on the very threshold of Paradise and a sinner demanded absolution, he would willingly turn his back on the court of heaven to hear his confession."

As the supplications grew stronger, M. Vianney realised that this was the will of God.

"Let us come into the church," he said. He remained for long, kneeling before the tabernacle. Then he entered the sacristy, put on his surplice, and made towards the confessional. He was carried there in triumph.

After Mass, the vicar-general arrived with an official notification of the bishop's decision. M. Vianney, who appeared calmer than ever before, accepted it in advance. When he was reminded of the various incidents of that strange night, he had but one comment: "I acted like a child."

It is certain that throughout the affair the curé was not in possession of himself; he was possessed - or, at any rate, led astray - by the devil. For the devil had managed to slide into his conscience the monstrous sophism that a priest of the Church can obey God while disobeying the Church; it was the one vulnerable spot - and the devil put his finger on it.

Never in M. Vianney's life was the fiend's occult influence so clearly shown; never was it so near to a great triumph. It is the lot of saints, by God's will, to be suddenly borne to the very edge of the abyss by the same Satan who bore Our Lord to the high mountain and on to the pinnacle of the Temple.

M. Vianney now knew what was God's will for him - that he should renounce solitude. The righteous desire for solitude that he had had - and in fact still retained and never lost - was the last manifestation of self that it remained for him to mortify.

If he had not otherwise suspected it, the devil in person, by the fury of his assaults, would have made it clear. The devil had played his trump card and lost.

Yet, one year later, he tried shock-tactics. Much in the story is dark: the actors were never known. But it bore the signature of its author.

One night, at eleven o'clock or thereabouts, a two-horse coach galloped through the village and pulled up before the church. Men got down and waited outside the presbytery. As the curé came out, at midnight, as was his custom, one of the men approached, placed a hand on his arm, and said warmly:

"M. le curé, if you wish to depart, we have a coach ready. . . ."

M. Vianney was equal to the occasion. "I have not the permission of my bishop," he said, and took refuge in the church.

That same year, his elder brother being seriously ill, he accepted an invitation to come and see him at Dardilly.

"Unaccustomed to coaches and weakened by the illness that you know of," wrote the Abbé Toccanier to his bishop, "he could not long bear the jolting. When he got to Parcieux, he said: 'I can go no further. I feel that I am weakening.' The roads were covered with ice and snow. Already at the ascent of the Grandes Balmes he had been seized with a bad heart attack.

He had got down from the coach and climbed the hill on foot. They wanted to cut him a stick from the hedge. He refused, because 'it would have been a theft.' They met a man carrying poles, one of which he bought for forty sous. Thus he covered three or four kilometres, slowly, by turns in the coach and on foot."

At Parcieux he had to give it up and turn back. As he returned along the road to the village, he met a diligence packed with pilgrims departing disappointed. They knew him at once, and started back after him; among them were some who had not been to confession for forty years.

"You see," said the sacristan. "God himself stopped you to bring you back without delay to the work which is dear to Him above all"

He made no reply. His strength of soul had returned; he no longer felt weary; his one wish was to go straight into the confessional.

His brother, who lingered on for a few months more, insistently urged him to come by train. He refused - did not even go to the funeral. He was not sufficiently sure of himself. Once for all, he had made the renunciation.

Thus ended the great temptation. It had brought M. Vianney within a hand's breadth of destruction, but, conquered, it had served to complete his purification. He never knew a worse temptation - for it had worn the disguise of love for God.

The Better Part

Faced with such a life, the historian feels out of his element. Even if we consider only his external activity, we seem never to come to the end of him. "It is not necessary to be successful in order to undertake." M. Vianney "undertook" endlessly - and succeeded. In his degree he imitated the love of God, of which the intrinsic virtue is to communicate itself.

The confessional, the answering of letters, and the woes of others, good works, debts to be paid, his curate's temper, the tricks of Satan, toothache and gastric pains, the maddening pricks of the hair shirt, want of food and sleep: add to that doubts as to his vocation and a pressing feeling of his unworthiness- for we must put all these things together, since all were pressing on him at once - did ever man have so many crosses? We are driven to say that his efforts at flight were less the work of the Evil Spirit than the sheer weariness of the flesh. M. Vianney was a poor man with a poor body - and his poor body could hold out no longer. A few years later came a villainous cough to rack him and to keep him from sleep even when the devil had given him up as a bad job.

God refused the poor body rest; yet the poor body stayed at its post, hung on somehow. The whole thing is mysterious. A doctor who examined the curé more than ten years before his death declared that given his physical condition and the life he led, "science could not explain how he remained alive." He no longer had that minimum which is necessary for life itself, yet his intense activity never slackened. Sometimes when he was driving himself back to the task in hand - mounting into the pulpit, maybe, or entering the confessional - he was seen to crumple up, as though he were being squeezed dry of his very substance. Then suddenly his task would pull him together; grace gave back the strength that was wanting, the priest revived the man.

He remained marvellously lucid, prompt to reply, unhesitating in the advice he gave. His sight remained good and his hearing very keen. Only his voice was failing, but he never spared it. What was most wonderful was that neither weariness, nor illness, nor age

made the slightest alteration in the miraculous evenness of his temper. He came out of the confessional overborne by the weight of human sin; he came down from the pulpit, his face streaming with tears, his frame shaken with the force of his entreaties; to mingle with the throng, daily larger and more pressing, which bore in upon him from all sides, in the street, in the sacristy, in the nave of the church; and crowded, jostled, pulled this way and that, he never for an instant lost his smile, his gentleness, the perfection of his courtesy.

In this you have the very heart of his sanctity; unyielding on matters of principle, unwearied in his love for men; pitiless to himself, full of gentleness and reverence to his neighbour. "The Curé d'Ars," writes the Abbé Monnin, "never sat down before anyone, and never allowed anyone to stand before him." He brushed aside compliments - even the most discreet. "Je vous presente bien mon respect," was his usual form of greeting. We know that he had no liking for society, and talk merely for the sake of talk seemed to him sheer waste of time. For all that, when he received his fellow-priests, relations, close friends, he delighted them with the point and high spirits of his repartee. Though he had no curiosity about 'the things which were not of God, he yet concerned himself with everything, and was ignorant of none of the great happenings of his day. He had never seen a railway and did not want to. When it was mentioned in his presence, he made a reference to the flaming chariot of Elias; it being his way always to bring the conversation back, as neatly as might be, to that plane which, in his judgment, it should never have left - seeing that man's only business is the salvation of his soul.

It is beyond dispute that he had a very considerable fund of natural intelligence, and his supernatural intelligence knew how to draw on it easily and with advantage; it seemed that the natural intelligence was enriched by and gained direction from the supernatural. We have on record countless of his retorts - pleasant, humorous, cutting very deep.

He was asked for relics for a lady of rank. His retort was not untouched with malice: "Let her make some herself." And to another woman, who wanted to know "how one should go to God," he

answered, "Quite straight, like a cannon ball."

Running through the notes of his catechism classes - after the change at La Providence he held them in the church, before crowds of pilgrims - we come, at every page, upon some unexpected image, natural and unforced yet with its own eloquence, upon some remark, quite simple, but pointed like an arrow and carrying far. Only to say what has to be said: to allow no effect that does not result from the thought alone: there you have the secret of the Gospel and of all the saints - especially Saint Francis of Assisi (who had a touch of Frenchness in him) and French saints generally. In the direct phrases of Joan of Arc and the Curé d'Ars we can recognise the same racial gift of words, the finely-chiselled speech of a people which wants to see straight and say true: the certitude of the Faith wedded to precision of thought.

"For our body, death is only a washing."

"We are in this world only as in a warehouse, for a brief space."

"In dying we make restitution."

"When you go to confession, you must understand what you are about to do; you are about to un-nail Our Lord."

"We should make the sign of the cross with great reverence. We begin with the head - that is the chief, the creation, the Father; then the heart, love, life, redemption, the Son; then the shoulders, strength, the Holy Ghost."

"Everything is a reminder of the Cross. We ourselves are made in the shape of a cross."

These images are not mere flowers of rhetoric; they are the fruit of meditation, to be chewed over slowly - right food for our souls. They come from no unapproachable saint, but from a man like us, who thinks like us, with the same hard head - only, as it happens, inspired. Not one of these statements can be faulted theologically. The Abbé Monnin had been struck by an expression that the curé was much given to using: "The heart of the saints is liquid." He found an analogous phrase in the *Summa Theologica*, which M.

Vianney had never read; the first effect of love, says the Angelic Doctor, is the liquefaction of the heart.

If grace is accused of doing violence to nature, no example could more admirably demonstrate the falsity of the accusation; the contrary is true. Grace, by cicatrising the wound in nature, restores nature to its proper perfection. In all this long life - abnormal, hemmed in, narrowly specialised, even, say the pagans, distorted - we find in the curé the purest type of French peasant. All the natural qualities of his character - the finesse, shrewd sense, politeness - that courtesy which is in Saint Joan and Saint Francis - flourished on a firm and rocklike base; they were not gradually obliterated, but came more sharply into view. He was more completely himself on the last day of his life than on any earlier day.

In the natural order, overwork, the extreme of asceticism, maceration, which had broken his body, would have had their effect on his character - would certainly have dulled his mind. In fact, his mental equipment was as undamaged as the keenness of his senses. The case is as much of a puzzle to psychologists as to doctors. Freud, who explains everything by "repression," would have to say that M. Vianney gave back to his environment immeasurably more life than he received from it. We must seek the source elsewhere - higher.

Throughout these pages we have had constantly to be touching on one subject - prayer, the gift of prayer, the gift of God's answer to prayer. Here we must look at it a little more closely.

"M. Vianney has practically given up prayers," you may object. "He looks back with regret to his shepherd days, when he could pray to God at his ease. He grudges this new life of his and is sorrowful at heart that he can no longer pray as much as he ought - that is, always. That is why three times he attempted flight . . . ." and so on, endlessly.

God knew what his saint was about, much better than he did; much better, even, than we do. When He recalled him to his apostolate, He certainly considered the sum of the curé's prayers sufficient.

Maybe M. Vianney prayed without quite realising that he prayed. If he thought that God had cast him for the role of Martha, he was wrong.

"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things. . . ."

Full as his life was, active, acted upon, the curé could never have heard that gentle reproach from Our Lord's lips. For thirty years together, without one single day's respite; is it thinkable that a Martha could have borne that, if, as constantly and assiduously, Mary had not prayed for her, prayed in her?

What is the point of classifying the friends of God as active or contemplative? The active are active only in the measure of their prayer. M. Vianney looked like Martha; he was Mary.

"The more one prays," he said, "the more one wants to pray" and the meaner seems the amount of one's praying. M. Vianney aspired to pray more, precisely because he prayed so much, because he prayed enormously much, because he lived in prayer - like a fish, which is unconscious of the water wherein it lives and which must have the whole ocean before it can feel that it lives in it. In the deepest seclusion of a Carthusian monastery, M. Vianney would not have been satisfied with the amount of his prayers. For he wanted all and the thirst of the elect will be appeased only in heaven, in the living torrent of eternity.

What is prayer? Chiefly the taking of a direction. A man fixes his thoughts, words, mind, heart - even his acts and his gestures, and the lightest and most meaningless of them at that - towards the Light which gives them worth. A Sister of Charity, dressing a wound quickly and skilfully or mechanically sweeping a kitchen floor, directs the bandage and the broom towards God. If she is firmly enough fixed in faith and charity, this is so even if she gives no conscious thought to it. From the day when M. Vianney could no longer "reserve" for God alone more than the time he took to say Mass and read his Office, he made that orientation, that choice of a direction, in virtue of which every act is an act of praise and adoration; so he kept himself fixed till night, till the too short moment wherein the demands of his ministry no longer seemed to

come as a screen between himself and God. He cried out with joy to find God again - though he had never lost sight of Him for a single instant.

This condition, wherever it is found, is always a privilege; it does not come for the wishing. It is bought - yet free: a gift. And a gift is not an exchange - or if it is an exchange, infinitely unequal. Man gives the little he can; God gives the rest. With no failure of justice, He might refuse it. But God does not fail in love.

To gain this gift from God, listen to what the Curé d'Ars gave God:

In the morning, were it only for a second, he raised his heart to God in thanksgiving for the gift of life. He knelt before the tabernacle in the certitude that all that had being, all that lived, breathed, thought- and himself most particularly - only thought, breathed, lived, had being by virtue of that real presence in the Host of Christ Himself, whole and entire. Why seek God in the deeps of abstract thought, when His Divinity is there together with the Human Nature It has assumed? when a few words spoken by the priest suffice to fix them in a little white disc of bread? The gift made to us is Christ Our Lord Himself - Christ born, Christ crucified, Christ risen - of one nature with the Father and the Holy Ghost. That is the world's true centre. Merely to gaze upon it would be enough. But the priest touches it, and priest and people receive it in their mouth that it may be the Food of their soul. If man could but keep in himself the God he receives at Mass, no act, no pain would cost him any effort; he could do all things and bear all things.

"I bear Him to the right, and He stays to the right; I bear Him to the left, and He stays to the left," said the curé, speaking of God in the Blessed Sacrament. There we have the supreme lesson of obedience. When God is in us - as he is in each soul that is in a state of grace - it is for us to let ourselves be moved to right or to left as He decides. Indwelt by God, man abdicates: God acts in him and through him.

"When M. Vianney preached at the foot of the altar," writes the Abbé Monnin, "he was so deeply moved by the Real Presence, that he could scarcely breathe or speak."

The curé declared one day:

"We have nought but a faith distant three hundred leagues from its object, as if God were across the sea. If we had a living, penetrating faith, like the saints, we should see Our Lord, as they did. There are priests who see Him every day at Mass."

Did the curé see Him? We shall come to that. Meanwhile, look again at the account of what he gave to God.

We have seen that the vital point of his day was the Mass; all the rest started from that and moved under that initial impulse. He said it not too fast - out of reverence - not too slowly - from fear of attracting notice; besides, as the Abbé Monnin tells us, "he consulted the general convenience rather than his own desire and his own piety." A pilgrim who several times served his Mass noticed that the only point at which he took longer than the ordinary priest was before the Communion. The liturgical prayers being ended, there was a secret colloquy between Our Lord and His servant. M. Vianney gazed lovingly upon the sacred Host. His mouth shaped words; he stopped, listened, seemed to speak again, and with a visible effort - as of a friend parting from a friend - after an instant's hesitation, he consumed the sacred species.

"He remained as though in an ecstasy for as much as five minutes," relates another- and he shed tears. He was seen to look at the Host, "sometimes in tears, sometimes with a smile."

One day, even, as he naively confesses, he dared to say to Our Lord: "My God, if I knew that I must have the misfortune not to see You for all eternity, I should never let You out of my hands."

He remained "lost in God" till the end of his thanksgiving. "When one has received Communion," he cried in one of his catechisms, "the soul buries itself in the sweetness of love like a bee in flowers."

Then he had to come down into the arena!

In order to fix his thought for the whole day, in spite of the windings and by-paths into which his penitents would be sure to draw it after them, he chose for each day some great and simple

truth for meditation, and on it he bent the whole force of his nature. On Sunday, it was the Blessed Trinity; on Monday, the Holy Ghost; on Tuesday, the Guardian Angels; on Wednesday, the Court of Heaven; on Thursday, the Blessed Eucharist; on Friday, the Passion; on Saturday, the Immaculate Virgin.

With the same object of simplification, "he had attached to the different hours of the breviary the remembrance of the different scenes of the Passion."

Next came the thought of his saints; it was no great effort to think of them; each had his place in the church, as M. Vianney himself had his sacristy and his confessional; they were joint-tenants with him.

On so sure and stable a base, prayer could build. He had not the time - nor, incidentally, had he the inclination - to enmesh himself in the elaborate preparations counselled by the manuals. Step by step with the increasing complexity of his ministry and his work for sinners went progressive simplification of his spiritual life. He thought less and less. He was more and more. For being is by nature simple. He emptied himself to give place to Being itself, which is simplicity itself, by virtue of its indestructible unity. He must very soon have attained to that prayer of simplicity, wherein, says Père Poulain, "attention in great part replaces reasoning, wherein affections and resolutions are varied but little and translated into few words." Perhaps, even, he may have reached that point without passing through, certainly without resting in, the intermediate stages. Active night, passive night (of the senses and the mind), purgative way, illuminative way, unitive way, according to the progression set out by Saint John of the Cross - in that we have a drama acted by God and himself, of which we shall never penetrate the mystery. Prayer henceforth cost him no more than action; he moved in God.

"Oh, how happy," said Saint Francis de Sales, "are those who, after having meditated separately on the motives they have for loving God, reducing their looks to a single gaze and all their thoughts to a single conclusion, fix their mind in the unity of contemplation, following the example of the great Saint Francis, who on his knees in prayer passed the whole night with these words: 'O God, my God

and my All.'"

That is, as it were, the curé's refrain - with so humble a curé one may speak thus familiarly of his highest prayer; it never ceased to buzz in his brain and in his heart, like a golden bee. As he sat hearing confessions and giving counsel, there were two men in him: one dispensing to his penitents the gifts of God according to their several needs; one saying to God, "I love you." It was the second, the one who loved (the one, it may be, who saw) who made it possible for the first to understand all from the slightest hint and to answer quickly and to the point, with that astonishing precision; and the second was not distracted from his love and his prayer by the first. He had fixed his mind, the rest followed; supreme activity towards creatures, supreme passivity towards God.

A moment ago we wondered how M. Vianney held on? It is simple enough. While he was giving, he did not for a moment cease to receive.

There you have the secret of his existence. It was vain for him to aspire to "the better part"; he had it- in his cares, his temptations, his sufferings, his daily over-work. He seemed weak and was strong; he seemed worn out and was stripped for action; he seemed sad and was joyful. His desolations were as nothing compared with the consolations which God showered upon him.

When the devil played his tricks, when he kept him from his sleep, is it to be thought that M. Vianney used his involuntary wakefulness only in being frightened or in mockery of the intruder? If he found pleasure in describing the funny side of it, was it not because that was not the only side? After all, he begged God to send his saints and angels to protect him from the evil one. Perhaps they came. It may be that this was the very moment God chose to pour out on the saint his most wonderful favours.

Of his intellectual lights, of the mysterious splendours that shone for him, of that total stripping away of imaginative and sensible form which is the characteristic of mystical vision, we have no proof, save his glance, which looked through and beyond the things of sense, his smile and the tears of his joy.

He seemed no longer to be of this world; he went isolated from men as by a "glory," which yet he bore with a most moving humility. But though visible consolations are never of first importance, God does not disdain to grant them to His saints as a foretaste of the joys to come in Heaven after the resurrection of the body. It may be that M. Vianney actually saw his Saviour during Mass - saw him in flesh and bone and sinew. At any rate, he was more than once surprised in conversation with Our Lady, and certain phrases he let slip give us reason to suppose that the little church and the old bedroom shone continuously with visitors from another world. God held his court there.

Thus: "You pray by night?" the Abbé Toccanier asked him towards the end of his life.

"When I awaken. I have not much time left to live. I cannot waste a moment."

"You lie on a plank and do not sleep much?"

"Oh," replied the saint, in momentary ecstasy, "I am not always lying on a plank. . . ."

Then he stopped. M. Toccanier pressed no further.

In 1859 he was asked about the direction to be given to a particular work.

"I was a little puzzled to know God's will," he said. "Saint Philomena appeared to me; she came down from heaven - beautiful, luminous, enfolded in a white cloud. She said to me: 'Your works are good, because there is nothing more precious than the salvation of souls.'"

He did not often make admissions of this sort; rather, both from reverence and from humility, he kept these great favours jealously hidden. Yet on two occasions - once to the Abbé Toccanier, once to the Abbé Monnin - he alluded to a nocturnal visitation - not the Devil this time; then to a voice - a very gentle voice - which murmured in his ear: "In te, Domine, speravi, non confundar in aeternum."

They suggested that it might have been his angel guardian; he did not say no. Unbelievers have their own explanation - he dreamt it. In that case others dreamed with him. Thus on one occasion, Mme. Durie, who collected for the curé's good works, came to Ars on the morning of 8 May, 1840. As she had a considerable sum to hand over, Catherine Lassagne had her into the presbytery. As she went upstairs she heard two voices in his room. One voice was saying, with infinite gentleness: "What do you ask?"

The other - the curé - replied, "Ah, most loving Mother, I ask for the conversion of sinners, the consolation of the afflicted, the relief of the sick, and more particularly of a person suffering for a long time and now praying for death if she cannot be cured."

As it happened, this was Mme. Durie herself. "She will be cured, but not yet," said the voice. Mme. Durie could not contain herself an instant longer. She pushed open the door. "What was my surprise," she says, "to see standing by the fireplace a lady of middle height, clad in a robe of dazzling white, sown with golden roses. Her shoes seemed to be white as snow. Her hands gleamed with the richest diamonds. Her brow was circled with a crown of stars shining like the sun. I was dazzled. When I could lift my eyes to hers, I saw her smile sweetly.

"'My good mother,' I cried out, 'take me to heaven.'

"'Later.'

"'Ah, my mother, the time is now.'

"'You will always be my child and I shall always be your mother.' With these words she vanished."

Mme. Durie, when she returned to herself, perceived the curé, "standing before the table, his hands clasped on his breast, his face shining, his glance fixed." She feared that he was dead. She went up to him and plucked at his soutane. The curé said:

"My God, is it You?"

"No, father, it is I."

M. Vianney emerged from his ecstasy.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"A lady."

"I too. Who is she?"

"If you speak of it, you will never set foot here again."

"May I tell you, Father, what I thought. I thought it was the Blessed Virgin."

"And you were not wrong."

He added of himself: "With Our Lady and Saint Philomena we get on well together."

These visits were nothing new. About 1828, a woman who wished to go to confession was awaiting the end of a conversation in the sacristy between the curé and a lady of great distinction, quietly dressed in the fashion of that day, but in white. When the lady had gone, the woman approached in her turn.

"Why did you not come up before?" asked M. Vianney.

"Because you were engaged in conversation, Father."

"Ah! you saw the lady?"

M. Vianney said no more. The mysterious lady had disappeared.

One of his converts, Francois Bourdin, who had been to confession seven times in succession, was yet troubled in conscience. Believing that he was not in a state of grace, he dared not approach the communion table. For the eighth time he approached the confessional, kneeling last in the file. At this moment, paying no attention to him, M. Vianney rose from his seat to speak to a lady, "wondrously beautiful, clad in pale blue and rather taller than himself."

The conversation - silent - lasted half-an-hour. The lady looked

upon the penitent with great kindness. "He felt as though an immense weight had been lifted from his breast, a feeling as of the inpouring of grace into his soul." Then he hid his face in his hands. A few moments later, M. Vianney touched his shoulder. The door had not opened, but the lady had vanished.

"Go, my friend," said the curé softly. "Go in peace. You do not need to come to confession. You are certainly in the grace of God."

For he had seen Mary, full of grace.

After all this, it need cause us no surprise that a young abbe, spending his holidays at Ars, noticed one night - about midnight - a strange light rising from the curé's roof: or that a curé from Chalon-sur-Saone saw M. Vianney, during evening prayers - to be precise, at the recital of the Act of Charity - slowly rise from the pulpit "until his feet were above the ledge."

Even, perhaps, we may not be surprised at the strange story told by a lady of Villefranche-sur-Saone - a sensible woman and no mystic. Kneeling before the curé to kiss his hand, she heard him say "gravely but with great courtesy":

"Oh! do not take my ring!"

Then she saw - what no one else ever saw - a brilliant gold ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. It would seem that the curé had, at the end of his life, passed beyond all the stages of mystical knowledge without any exception, and had received on earth the maximum that can be received here - all but the Beatific Vision. His finger had been encircled by the mysterious ring of the "spiritual marriage." Like Saint Theresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena, he was wedded to God. Saint John of the Cross tells us that "this spiritual marriage does not allow suffering"; but for increase of merit God can make exceptions - as he did for His mother.

Death

After the great flight of 1853, M. Vianney had rounded the cape: like it or not, he was curé of Ars for life, and he knew it.

M. Raymond had gone, so had the Devil. But illness remained, and old age, and pilgrims - these to the number of a hundred thousand in the last year of his life. But the bishop had given him assistants, for whom a house was to be built in the square; and their presence comforted him with the assurance that his "mission" would not end with his carcass. Obviously his assistants could not "assist" in the heaviest part of his work - the confessional, catechising, preaching. It was not to hear and see them that the crowds had come; but at least they could use all their ingenuity to protect him from the merely vexatious, to keep him free from unnecessary tasks, to look after him. He was much helped, too, by the Sisters of Saint Joseph, at the girls' school, the Brothers of the Holy Family, at the boys' school, his servants, the mayor, and a group of friends who had settled in the district - MM. Cuol, Julien, Veret, Pag£s, de la Bade.

He had to put up with it. He was fed better; he accepted a little meat and a measure of wine at mid-day. In winter, without his knowledge, they slipped a foot-warmer under the loose board in the confessional on which he rested his feet. Further, he had to get used to not being abused, not being thwarted, seeing himself admired, honoured, venerated; for him a kind of back-handed penance. In any case, he was not misled by what good people thought they saw in him. He realised with native acuteness that he did not amount to much!

He had a horror of honours for himself and was awed by them in others. He was more famous than the world's most famous canon; wherefore Monsignor Devie had thought it superfluous to raise him to the canon's stall. Consequently, when the next bishop, Monsignor Chalandon, sprang this horrid surprise on the old man - on 25 October, 1850 - he had to screw himself up to let them put the mozetta on him. We are told that after the Veni Creator he fled into the sacristy and tore off the silk and ermine cape. Only when it was pointed out to him that this was an insult to the bishop, he put it on

again, but kept well back in a dark recess. He returned to the presbytery looking as though he had been condemned to death. He never again wore the terrifying ornament, and sold it for the parish funds.

Two years later, on the motion of the Marquis de Castellane, at that time sous-prefet of Trevoux, M. Vianney was recommended by the Minister of Public Instruction and Worship for the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, it being the Emperor's birthday. The report ran:

"The confidence of the population in M. the incumbent of Ars is boundless; it is that angelic faith which moves mountains. Several occurrences are quoted which it would be hard to explain on natural grounds."

What, incidentally, would a minister of the republic today make of a report like that?

The mayor brought the news to M. Vianney. He did not turn a hair.

"Does it mean money for my poor?"

"No; it is only an honour."

"In that case, if you don't mind, tell the Emperor that I do not want it."

Naturally the mayor did nothing of the sort; but the curé would not let the cross be pinned on his soutane. To an artist who had come to paint his portrait he said cheerfully:

"Take my advice: paint me in my canon's mozetta, with my cross of honour, and write underneath: 'Nothing: Pride'"

He was afraid, it seemed, that God would say to him: "Go! you have received your reward."

These trifles went their way, giving onlookers something to laugh over - for a saint can be funny when he is defending his beloved humility. Defend it, he did, against painters, sculptors, photographers. One artist did manage to get a sketch of him - and was nearly thrown out for his pains.

At this time of his fame, two things are to be noted - a great joy and a great anxiety. The joy was Pius IX's definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, on 8 December, 1854. We must remember that M. Vianney had consecrated his parish to Mary Conceived without Sin; had placed in every house in his village a simple coloured statuette of Our Lady blessed by himself; had hung round the neck of the miraculous statue of Our Lady a little gold heart containing a silk ribbon whereon were inscribed the names of all his parishioners. Remember, above all, that he had seen her immaculate. In honour of the definition, he wore at High Mass a magnificent chasuble of blue velvet figured in gold; he went up into the pulpit and preached. In the evening, he rang the bell with his own hands to give the signal for the illuminations; he led a torchlight procession through the streets. For he had never for a moment doubted that the Blessed Virgin had been "preserved from all stain of original sin from the first moment of her conception."

His great anxiety was likewise concerned with Our Lady; or rather, with her apparition at La Salette. There, in 1846, she spoke, weeping, to two shepherd children, Melanie Mathieu and Maximilien Giraud, and confided terrible secrets to them. So ran the story. Needless to say, it was widely doubted and there was bitter controversy. M. Vianney, with his instinct for the supernatural, believed in it instantly. But in 1850, for a complication of reasons, the boy Maximilian was brought to him. He was an odd boy; was, moreover, bored with all the cross-questioning he had had to put up with. At any rate, his answers were so vague and oddly phrased, that M. Vianney began to be less certain. The decision of the Bishop of Grenoble reassured him - but the shadow of a doubt remained. He gave up a devotion in which he had found too much pleasure - the precise point of his pleasure being that the Queen of Angels, who had never appeared to him but in secret, should have made her appearance to two children so strikingly known to the whole world. For eight years he awaited a sign. Then he surrendered. Being in need of a certain sum, he prayed to Our Lady of La Salette, received it to the exact halfpenny - and that last shadow of doubt disappeared.

Such sadness as he still knew was but shadowy too. The war with Italy, the position of the Holy See, the state of France. We are told

that he foretold the war of 1870 and the Great War of 1914. It may be so; his glance could pierce the future, that we know. In any case, he had attained a serenity in which it came natural to him to see all human suffering in its place in God's plan. For him there could be no serious object in this world but to convert the living and pray for the dead.

It is not easy to put into words that strange last state on earth of his soul; he was piercingly happy; he could look on death.

He seemed deeply sunk in old age; his long curling hair had been snow-white this twenty years. He could not imaginably be more shrunken, fleshless, drained dry of colour, unsubstantial. The Abbé Monnin says that his body gave the impression of a "shade" - "in truth one saw through it, and the soul, burning in the great sunken eyes, shone through the transparent yellow of his face and hands." He was torn by a continual cough; coming downstairs he had to cling to the wall. He was always dying, yet he did not die. At the end men had come to believe that he never would die, that by a singular gift of God his soul had settled down to continued existence in a mere shell, a mummy, through which it might still carry on its work in this world of sinful men. Indeed, it was argued that, as the "corpse" had kept on its feet and stumbled along so far, there seemed no special reason why, under Providence, the same odd but beneficent arrangement should not go on till the end of time, and M. Vianney might remain eternally Curé of Ars, since, God knew, the world needed him.

His way of life suffered no change. He continued to give sixteen or seventeen hours a day to the confessional. He took his regular place in the pulpit near the Lady Chapel and there spoke - by gestures mainly, since voice he had practically none, by the expression of his face and by the tears pouring from his eyes - of the great goodness of God. Men thronged closer round him; a whole world of them, dragged from their sleep by this one old man, that they might hear his last lessons, kneel under his last blessings, that their souls might live again. The atmosphere was stifling. He, at least, never seemed to notice it.

The truth was that he was hiding the extent of his sufferings. He

had made up his mind to die working, since God's will had refused him the contemplative life that he craved. He saw his end drawing near - saw, we may well believe, the exact day of it. He would not drag out months or weeks in bed. He gathered together all the scant remains of strength he knew were in him, that he might not die with a single ounce still unspent. His mind was clear about that as about all else - never clearer.

He fell into the way of often speaking of his death. "We are going - death must come and come soon."

On Corpus Christi, 1859, he did not carry the monstrance; only he held it to bless his people "one last time."

On the eighteenth of July in that same year he received a visit from Mme. Durie - who had herself seen the Blessed Virgin in a vision.

"I have only a few days to live," he told her. "I must have time to prepare. Do not tell anyone. They would all rush to confession and I should be overwhelmed. . . . I do not know," he added, in tears, "if I have well carried out the work of my ministry."

"Father, beg God to leave you still a little time among us."

"No. God will not grant it."

"Then, Father, when are you to die?"

"Either at the end of this month or the beginning of the next."

Mme. Durie returned to Ars the very day after his death.

It was 29th July. The heat was frightful. It was learnt that M. Vianney, making his way to the church at midnight, had fallen down several times in his room and on the stairs. For all that, "he went through his ordinary round of work." But when he returned in the evening he sank fainting on to a chair.

"I can do no more," he said.

He had never complained but with a smile.

"Sinners will kill the sinner. . . . Ah! I know a man who would be nicely caught if he were not going to Heaven! I often think that even were there no life to come, it would be happiness enough to love God in this life, to serve Him and to be able to do something for His glory."

This time he had reached the end. At one o'clock in the morning he called Catherine Lassagne.

"It is my poor end," he said. "You must send for the Curé of Jassans."

The sacristan, who always followed him as his shadow, found him lying ice cold in the bed. The Abbé Toccanier arrived and tried to cheer him.

"Saint Philomena will cure you, as she did sixteen years ago."

"This is beyond Saint Philomena."

For the first time the pilgrims missed the sight of him coming down to them. Some came to his bedside to make their confession.

During the morning he let them put a mattress under him. He drank whatever was placed to his lips. Flies wandered over his face. As a Sister of Saint Joseph was brushing them away with a handkerchief, he murmured feebly: "Leave me my poor flies. . . . Nothing worries me but sin."

His own confession was quite simple, lucid, matter of fact; no trace of despair, no suggestion of ecstasy. He seemed happy.

Pilgrims laid siege to the house, sent up objects to be blessed by the dying man. Some, even, more privileged than the rest, got his blessing for themselves. The crowd, massed in the square, besought him; he blessed them from his bed. The tinkling of a little bell told that his hand was upraised, and they fell prostrate on the ground.

Ars was a place of prayer and shedding of tears. Saint Philomena, in her shrine, was implored - wildly, fiercely implored - to obtain a miracle for her friend. One came "with clasped hands to beg her to ask God to cure him. He gazed fixedly at her, and without a word she made a sign that it could not be."

Thus the curé lasted on for four days. "His lips were not seen to move," says a bystander, "but his eyes remained fixed, gazing upwards, and it seemed that he was in contemplation, I believe that at that time some extraordinary thing was happening in him."

About three o'clock on Tuesday the ringing of the bell announced that Our Lord was entering the presbytery. "A score of priests, bearing tapers, escorted the Blessed Sacrament."

"It is sad to be making one's last Communion," he said.

He sat up unsupported and joined his hands, tears pouring from his eyes. His confessor gave him the viaticum, then extreme unction.

That evening the Bishop of Belley came to see him. M. Vianney knew him and thanked him. Then, at two o'clock in the morning, "with no struggle, no agony, no violence," he went to sleep in the Lord, at the precise moment when the young priest, Abbé Monnin, who was reciting the prayers for the Recommendation of a Departing Soul, said the words: "Veniant illi obviam Sancti Angeli Dei et perducant earn in civitatem coelestem Jerusalem."

There was great rejoicing that day in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Then it began to be known how much he had done. From the day of his death, along with the tumult of regrets and tears, there came an immense throng of witnesses. The bodies he had made whole, the souls he had saved, the works he had founded, the vocations he had guided - all bore their witness to his inexhaustible activity for God.

In Paul Borel's great painting, the curé is shown in the doorway of his sacristy, signing to the penitents to come forward, his vestments tossed by the wind that blows through. That wind is a very perfect symbol of the wind of love set rushing by his mere approach. The mighty crowd - three hundred priests, six thousand of the faithful - which followed his remains through the village streets on the sixth of August felt the strong breath of that wind. For forty-eight hours they had passed slowly through the ground-floor room where lay the body, clad in the neckband and white rochet that he had always worn; they had found the saint as calm and gentle as in life, with

not a line to show that death had come. All his scanty possessions had been shut away, to save them from the spoiling fingers of the pious. Women brought apronfuls of images, crucifixes, rosaries and medals to touch the body. When the coffin was brought in, there was a silence that seemed to catch the beauty of that great life, and men knelt - not as to a man.

An agnostic, seeing that, cried out like the executioner of Joan of Arc:

"This was a saint," and he felt grace enter into him.

Jean-Marie Vianney was carried, not to a tomb, but to a triumph; such joy was in men's mourning, such light shone in men's tears.

Yet, after all, who was the man? No more than a good country parish priest - but one who had aimed to be that fully, flawlessly, until the end.

"Now, this happened in France" - so runs the tale - "in a century whose glory it was to have lost faith, hope and charity."

Three years later, Monsignor de Langalerie began the *Procès de l'ordinaire*, and took the depositions of seventy witnesses. In 1865 he took a copy to Rome. On 6 February, 1866, Pius IX, in spite of the rule which demands a delay of ten years, opened the *Procès Apostolique*. The invasion of Rome held up the cause. But on 30 October, 1872, the Curé d'Ars was declared Venerable. On 8 January, 1905, Pius X - who had been, like him, a curé - declared him beatified and made him "patron of all priests having charge of souls in France." Finally, on 1 November, 1924, Pius XI canonised him in Saint Peter's, in the presence of two hundred bishops and thirty-five cardinals.

Henceforth he is to have his approved cultus and his shrine at Ars. It remains a place of pilgrimage, not quite as crowded as during his life, but as continuous. Miracles, too, are not less conclusive for being less frequent. For himself and his little saint they built a basilica, which expresses, alas, neither glory - for it is hideous - nor simple poverty - for it is over-elaborate. But one may close one's

eyes and kneel humbly before the shrine in spirit and in truth. And the little old church which Pius X saved from destruction is an ideal place of refuge. The choir has been cut away, not to block one's view of certain worthless "splendours"; but all the rest - the large and small pulpits, the chapels, the sacristy - remains untouched. When, in the morning, the curé's venerable successor offers a theme for the meditation of a handful of faithful and a few nuns, quietly reading out a phrase, then by a few moments' pause giving it time to make its own way into their minds, the saint's soul seems to linger still. There is the same quality of simplicity, silence and prayer.

It must be that he is always there, with his company of saints: that some influence of him has passed into all the objects before which he prayed: that sanctity does not pass, like the glory of the world. Men's mightiest works will perish - their pictures, marbles, books - even the books which seem to have some touch of inspiration from God. Ars might some day be destroyed by war, riot, sacrilegious violence, with its church, its square, its presbytery (which saints did not disdain to visit) - in a word all that remains to move the pilgrim with the chilliness of its destitution. The saint's prayer will not pass. For it is immortal as he is immortal; and to it all these works of men may well owe such hold on existence as they may have.

The Challenge of the Curé d'Ars, by G K Chesterton

The Catholic Church is much too universal to be called international; for she is older than all the nations. She is not some sort of new bridge to be built between these separated islands; she is the very earth and ocean-bed on which they are built. Nevertheless, as she has always been able to work through variety as well as uniformity, she is now able to appeal to the nations as nations, but to appeal to them rather to learn from each other than to lie about each other. The Catholic nations are very national; but each has specialised in some spiritual truth, rather as each of the Catholic Guilds specialised in some technical trade. So the fulness and kindliness of the Faith has abounded in Flemish art and folk-lore; so the fire and chivalry of it in Polish history and tradition. The Spaniard has splendidly maintained in poverty that human dignity which he never wholly lost even under the load of wealth. The Irish have kept a clear space for that strange purity of the mind, in which even hatred has become something clean and translucent, compared with the loves of other lands. In the same fashion, French Catholicism gathers up and gives expression to the vital virtues of France, of which (needless to say) it was the creator in the dim and turbulent age when Gauls and Franks became a nation. And it is of the very nature of France that the French Catholic should emphasise the fact that the Church is a challenge.

In this case we feel at its worst the weakening of the word "apologetics" for the defence of Christian dogma, and the verbal degeneration by which the defiant thing once called an apologia has dwindled to the feeble thing called an apology. In fact, of course, an apologia is almost the opposite of an apology. But it is true, and it may in some cases even be fortunate, that men of a somewhat milder type or tradition have often defended Christianity, and even Catholicism, in a tone that was deprecating and tactful, and might have seemed to some to be apologetic. There is nothing of this sort about the typical French Catholic. There is nothing of this sort about M. Henri Gheon. There was nothing of this sort about the Curé d'Ars. The first fact that will strike any one outside the

Catholic Church, and even a good many people inside it, in the attitude both of the author and the subject of this book is that a Frenchman of this sort is essentially militant. There is nothing apologetic about his apologetics. He is not only propagandist but provocative. It is a quality which can, of course take bad as well as good forms; just as it can be put to the service of bad as well as good causes. But there has always been apparent on both sides of the French religious quarrel a certain insistent and irritant character. I have heard that a sceptical mayor of some French town was not content with taking the metal of certain church bells, but cast it into a statue of Zola. He did the most annoying thing he could possibly think of. I believe that a statue of a great French freethinker, honoured in foreign countries as a great scholar and man of letters, was set up to be a glory to his own village; and the villagers instantly battered it to pieces with stones. Try to imagine villagers in Surrey doing this to a statue of George Meredith, because he was an agnostic. To put this aspect of French Catholicism in a word the defence is not merely defensive. It is, in the honourable and soldierly sense of the word, offensive. As Mr. Belloc has remarked somewhere, "The French do not fight with reluctance."

This book is the story of a humble and saintly parish priest, who lived a quiet life in a rustic corner. It is natural to think first of him as gentle and pacific; and in one sense, like all such men, he was very gentle and very pacific. But he was, above all things, challenging. If I might so express it, he was above all things aggravating. He was a walking contradiction; he cut across the whole trend of his time at right angles; quite content to know that the angle was right. Nearly all people of the other race or temper, like so many English and some German people, take their divergence in a sort of curve, feeling the forces round them as things that can be partially followed if they are ultimately left behind. But M. Gheon sees M. Vianney primarily as a protest and a denial; a denial of all the things which were at his moment most confidently affirmed. M. Vianney appeared in history at the supreme moment of the French Revolution, when it was proclaiming both tremendous truths and tremendous falsehoods as with the trumpets of the Apocalypse. And in the midst of all those

thunders the Curé d'Ars stood calmly talking about something totally different. He was talking exactly as he would have talked if he had been a Celtic hermit of the Dark Ages talking to a savage tribe of Piets. At the very moment when the human world seemed to have been enlarged beyond all limits for all to see, he declared it to be quite small as compared with things that hardly anybody could see. At the moment when thousands thought they were reading a radiant and self-evident philosophy, proved quite clearly in black and white, he calmly called its black white and its white black. For us who live at the end of the rationalist and republican epoch, it is difficult to measure how hopeful was the beginning of it, and how hopeless seemed the contradiction of it. For already the curve of the world has begun to creep backwards a little nearer to the mysticism of such a saint; though, alas, the modern mind has more often changed negatively by disillusion than positively by enthusiasm. But in the atmosphere of his own age, he was like a man dug up out of some other aeon or flung from some other planet. And indeed the quarrel of the world about such a man must always be, in a deeper sense, on whether he has risen from the Stone Age or fallen from the stars.

M. Gheon, the author of so many striking dramas, sees here chiefly the drama of such a defiance. Sometimes, I am tempted to fancy, he even exaggerates the contrast, not so much between the saint and the period as between the saint and the ordinary life. But I recognise in that the fighting French exaggeration; such as appears in Wilfrid Ward's life of his father, touching the parallel between the French and English reaction. While Newman was rationalising against rationalism in *The Grammar of Assent*, Veuillot was hurling Holy Water in the faces of the French rationalists, as the thing that would exasperate them most. And there is in fact a vital value in emphasising the contrast, as a part of the controversy that concerns everybody. The critics of the Church are notably unlucky in hitting on the charge that she belongs to a feudal world or particular periods of the past. They are driven to call so many modern things mediaeval, that it is at last apparent that she is no more mediaeval than she is modern. It was in the dull daylight of the manufacturing and materialistic nineteenth century that the unearthly light shone from the cavern of Lourdes. And it was in the full sunrise of the secular age of reason introduced by the eighteenth century that a

nimbus not of that age or of this world could be seen round the head of the Curé d'Ars.

G. K. Chesterton.

About This EBook

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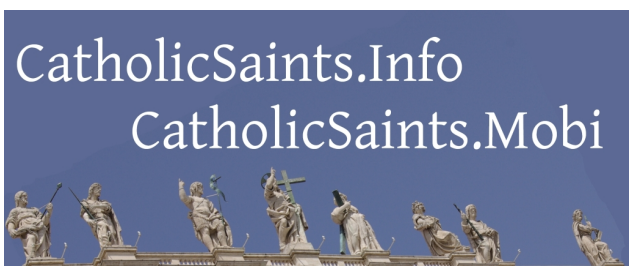
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